7.5

Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

Fremd Torturchen

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How long has it been, I wonder?

A century? A millennium? No, it could never have been such a fleeting span.

It's been so long since the reconstruction.

It seems almost comical, trying to reconcile that period with the human notion of "time."

I spent so, so long in a slumber wholly unlike the kind that normal people experience.

And even now, no one responds to me. I live a life of utter solitude.

For death is a luxury denied to me.

Now I spend my days alone in the eternal prison that is my life, and—

A Message from Someone (0)

It feels like far too great a punishment.

And yet, considering what I did, perhaps I'm getting off lightly.

...Hmm?

Wait. Wait just a moment. Could it be?

Is it possible? ...Am I reaching someone?

There's no answer. No response.

I don't hear a single, solitary noise.

And yet I can tell my words have found a recipient.

I'm certain of it.

You can hear this?

Ah, I see.

Then, as a once-peerless mage, I have no choice but to admit that perhaps I've been chanced upon by a coincidence, one that could well be described as a miracle.

But now that I'm faced with this stroke of good fortune, what should I say?

I haven't the slightest idea.

It's been such a long time since I last held a proper conversation, you see.

The last words anyone said to me directly were cries of resentment.

After that, it was all just one-sided prayers. At this point, the only sentiment I have for you people is—

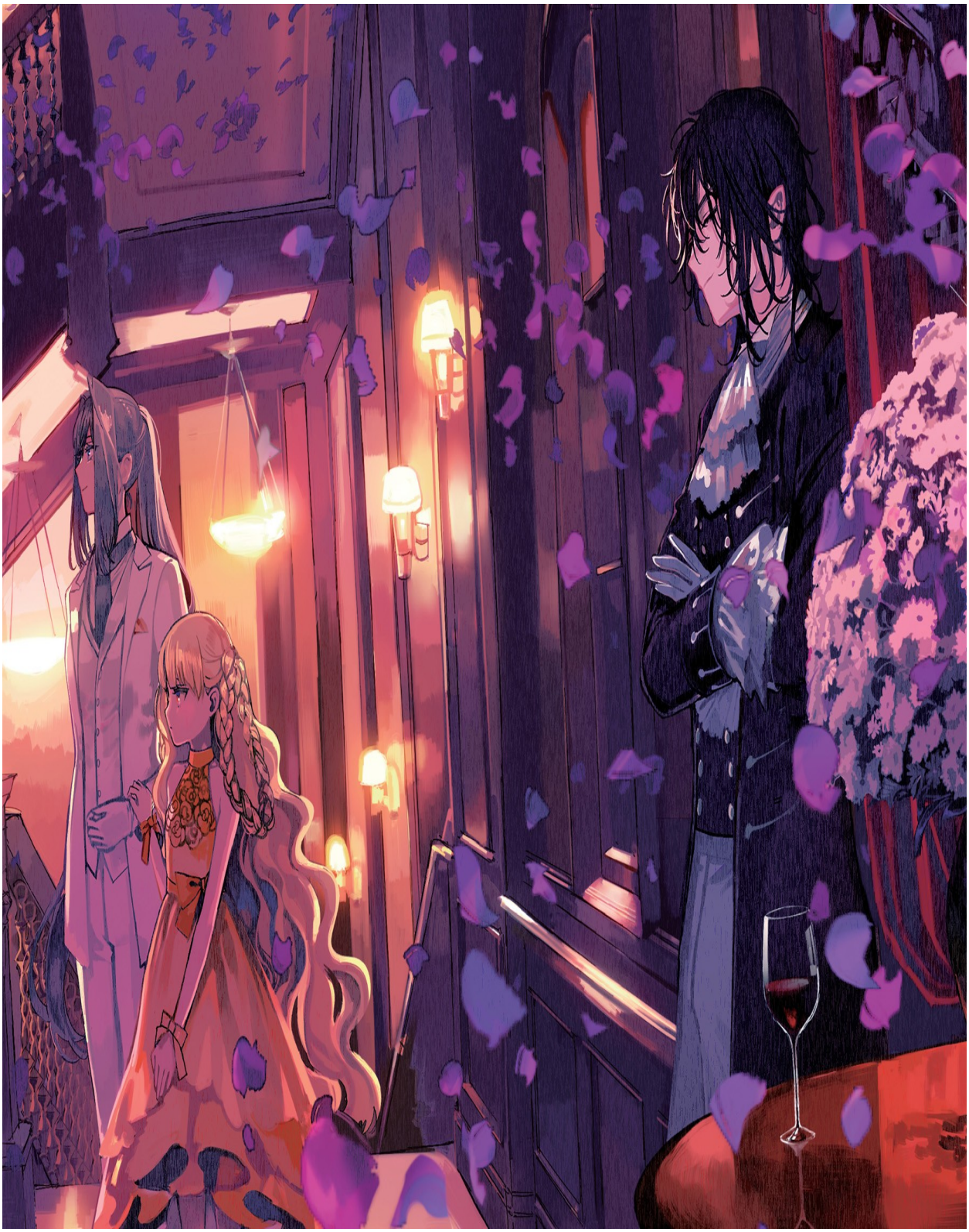
No, I should stop there. You're being kind enough to listen to me, so I should keep that to myself. Even I have enough tact left to realize that.

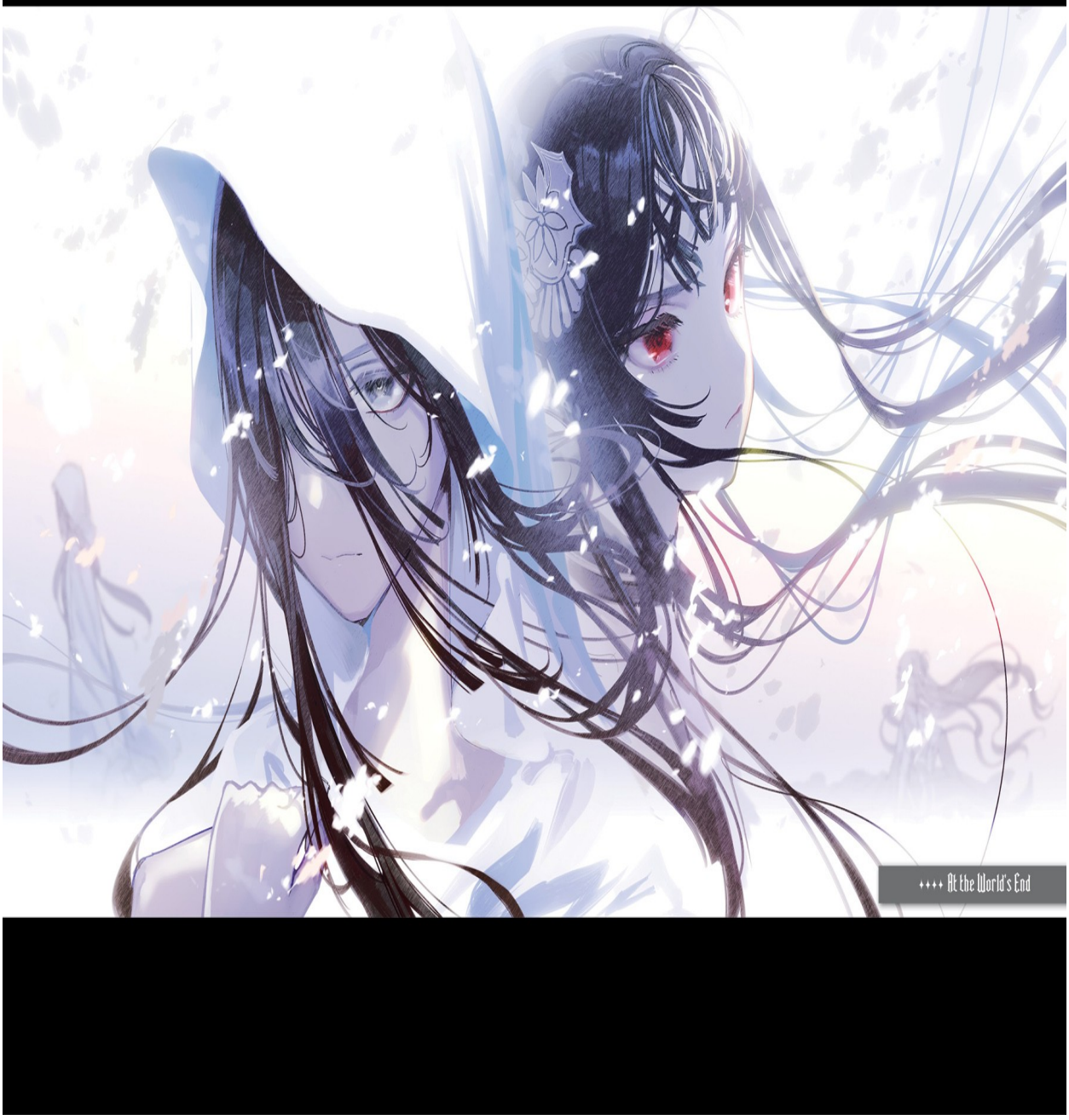
If I think back to my life... Ah, that's right.

This is what I should lead with.

Hello. It's nice to meet you.

✦✦✦✦ A Party for Elisabeth's Third Anniversary as Captain




✦✦✦✦ At the World's End

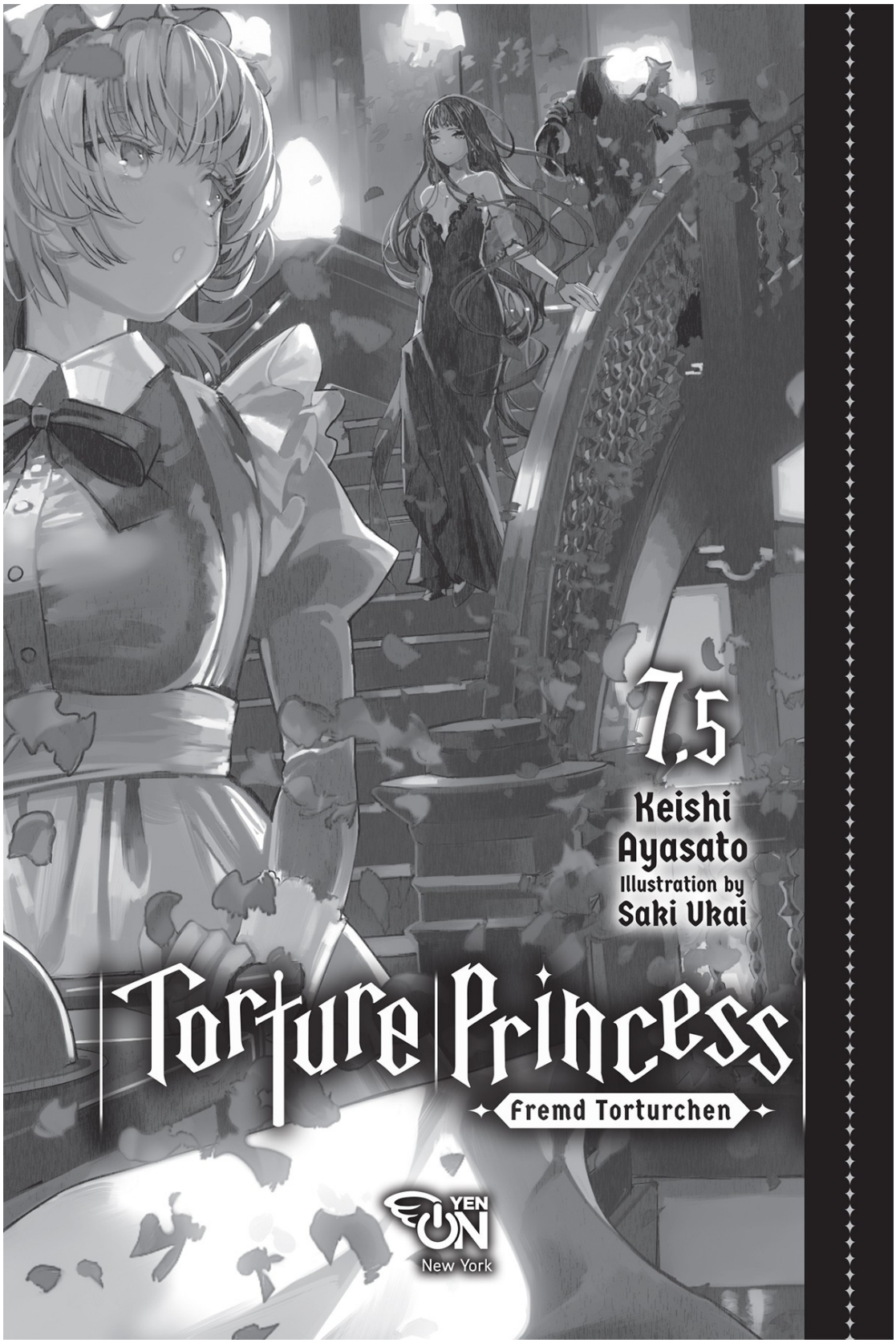


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Illustration by Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

Fremd Torturchen

YEN ON

New York

Copyright

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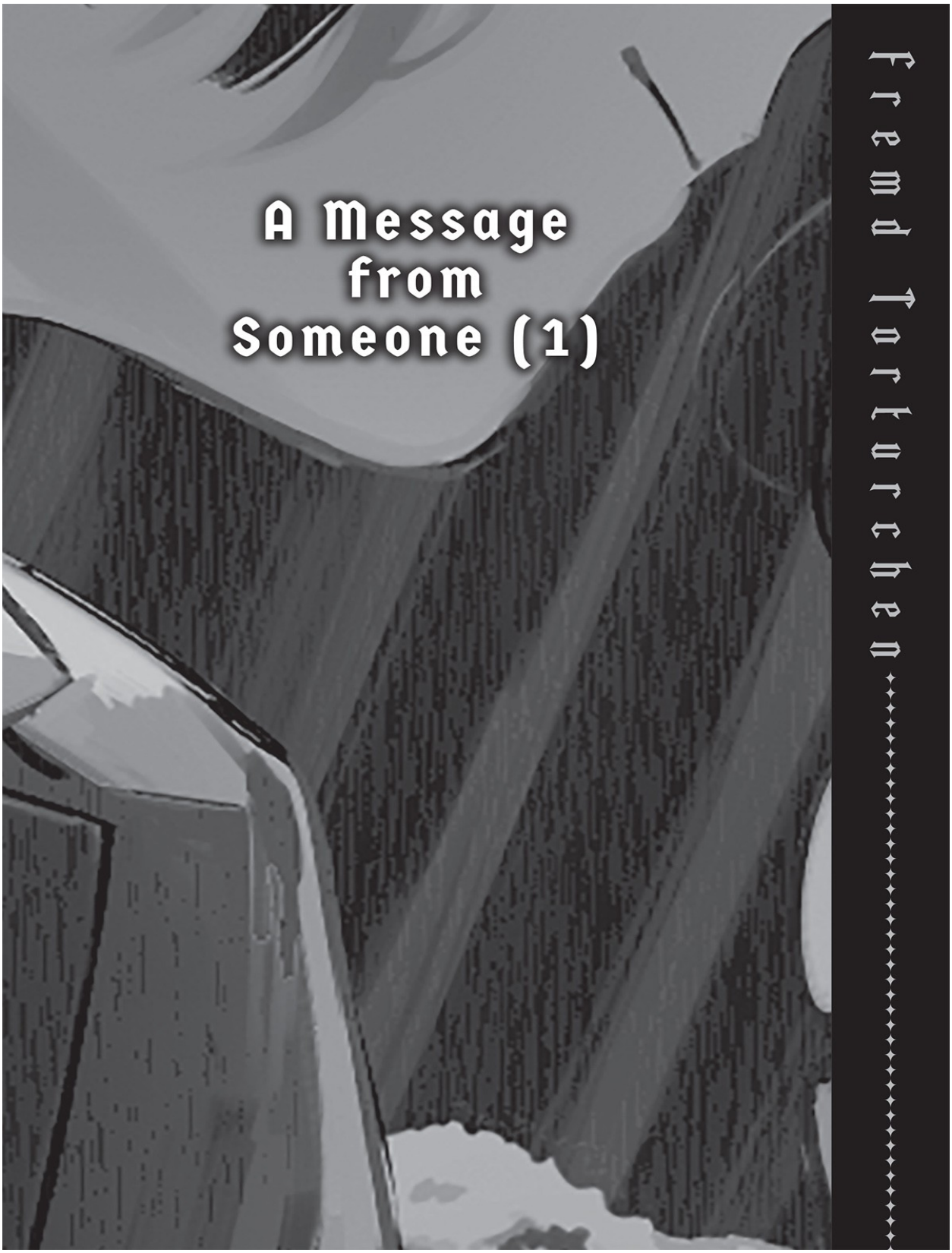

A Message
from
Someone (1)

A Message from Someone (1)

Hello. It’s nice to meet you.

You know, it brings me great joy to have my voice reach you like this.

Are you a man? A woman? Either way, I’m very glad, and either way, it doesn’t matter in the slightest. After all, you exist in this world. And that means you must be one of God’s creations. That’s the only thing that matters.

As such, I find this miracle all the more delightful. Do you have any idea just how glad I am? I suspect eternity could pass and you still wouldn’t be able to fathom the depths of my joy.

Ah, that’s right—you don’t know anything about me.

You don’t know what my face looks like, or what my voice sounds like, or what sort of flesh and bone I’m made up of.

You don’t know how I’ve lived my life, or how I was loved, or how my deeds were exaggerated, or what they made me out to be.

You know nothing. Nor do you have any reason to.

And so I say, It’s nice to meet you.

And thank you for lending an ear to me, me, and me alone. I extend to you my deepest gratitude. But at the same time, I can’t help but wonder—is my voice actually reaching you?

Perhaps in truth, this message of mine is going unheard.

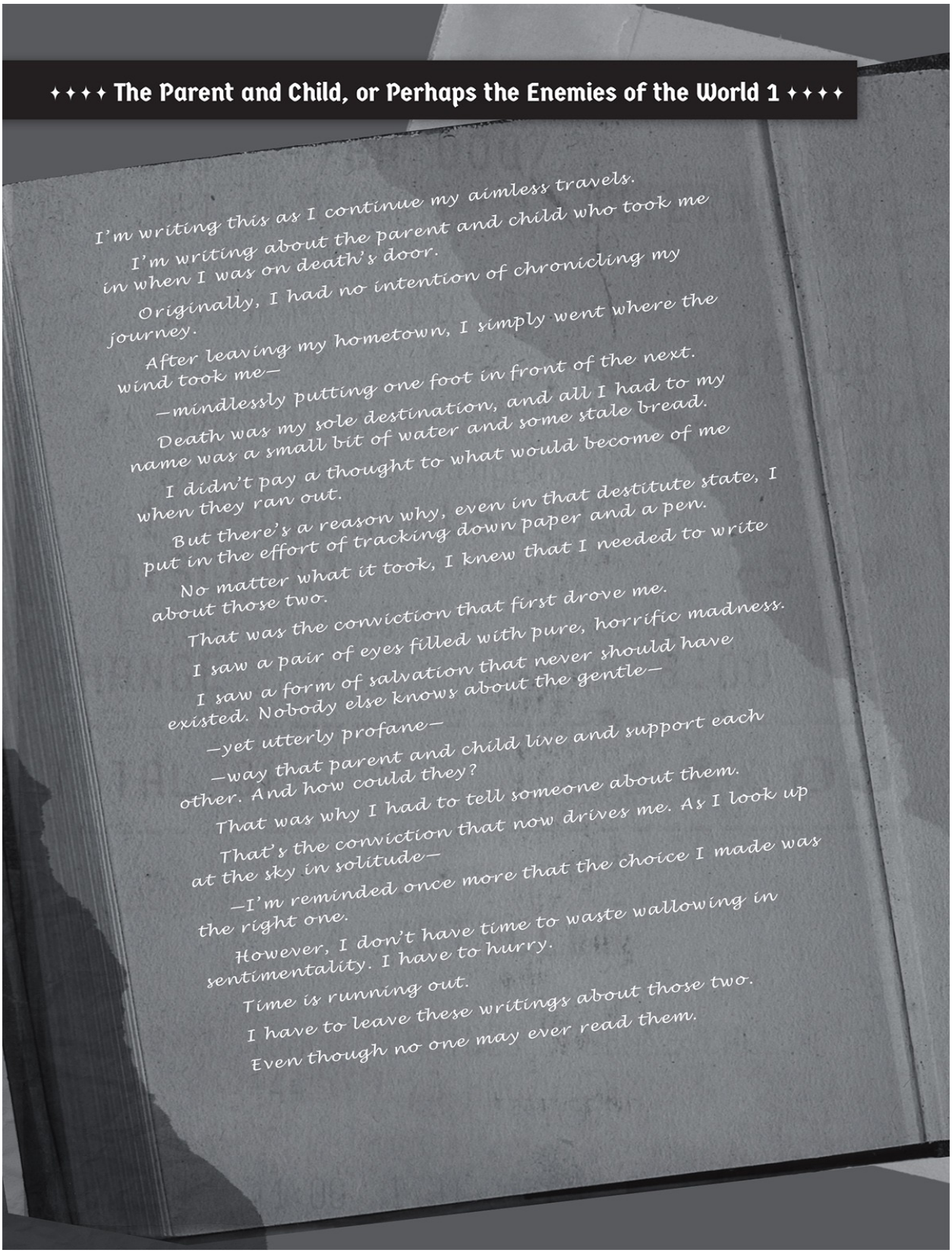
Just like it did all those lifetimes ago. But if so, that’s fine, too.

At the end of the day, you listening or not doesn’t really change anything. After all, this is much like a prayer, and prayer is supposed to be a one-way street.

It’s the same as when you all prayed. Was I listening? Was I not?

Either way, it didn’t really matter.

Wouldn’t you agree?



✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 1 ✦✦✦✦

I'm writing this as I continue my aimless travels.

I'm writing about the parent and child who took me in when I was on death's door.

Originally, I had no intention of chronicling my journey.

After leaving my hometown, I simply went where the wind took me—

—mindlessly putting one foot in front of the next.

Death was my sole destination, and all I had to my name was a small bit of water and some stale bread.

I didn't pay a thought to what would become of me when they ran out.

But there's a reason why, even in that destitute state, I put in the effort of tracking down paper and a pen.

No matter what it took, I knew that I needed to write about those two.

That was the conviction that first drove me.

I saw a pair of eyes filled with pure, horrific madness.

I saw a form of salvation that never should have existed. Nobody else knows about the gentle—

—yet utterly profane—

—way that parent and child live and support each other. And how could they?

That was why I had to tell someone about them.

That's the conviction that now drives me. As I look up at the sky in solitude—

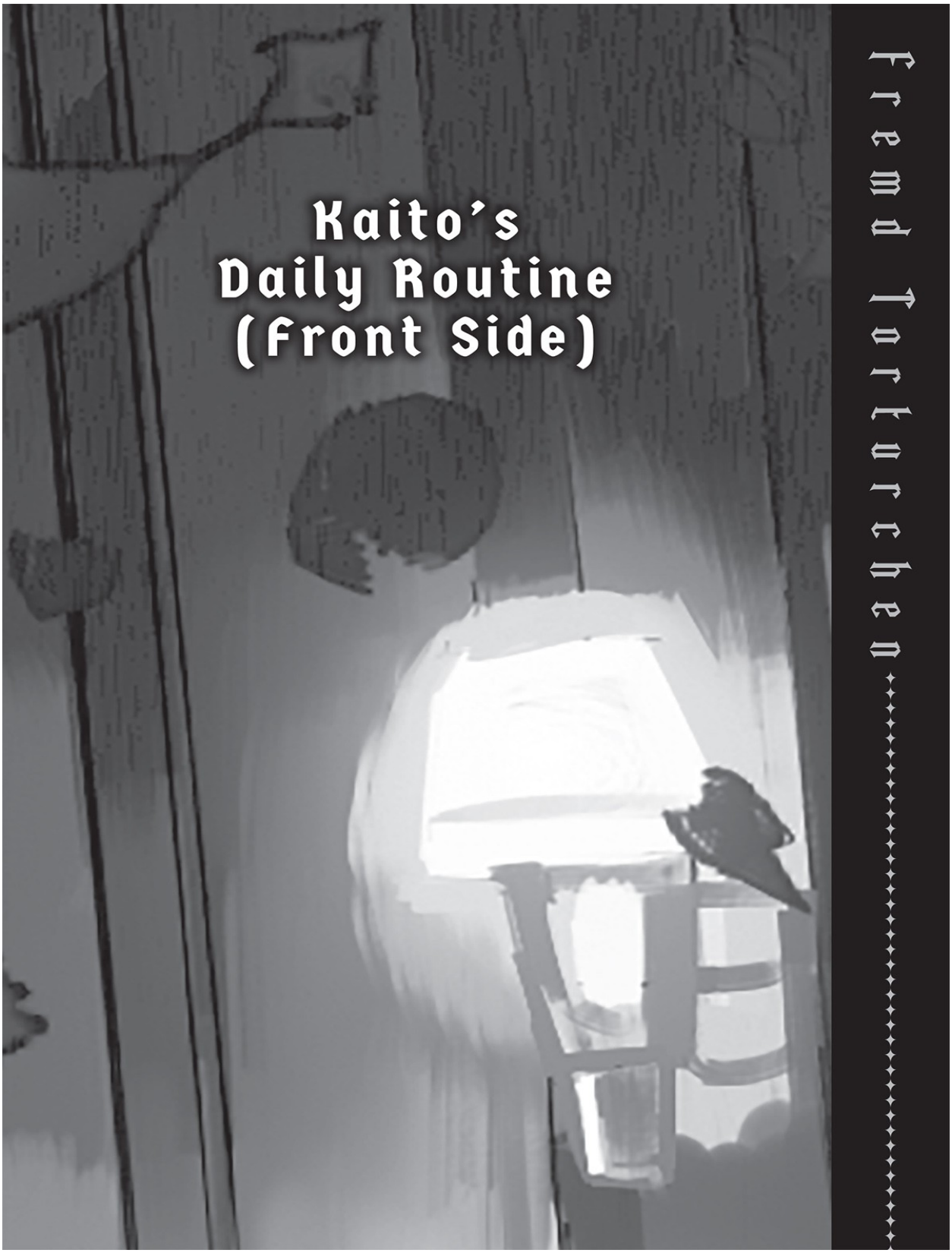
—I'm reminded once more that the choice I made was the right one.

However, I don't have time to waste wallowing in sentimentality. I have to hurry.

Time is running out.

I have to leave these writings about those two.

Even though no one may ever read them.


Kaito's
Daily Routine
(Front Side)

Kaito’s Daily Routine (Front Side)

Once someone dies, that’s it. No amount of weeping and pleading will change the fact that their existence is over.

However, Kaito Sena was one of the rare exceptions to that rule.

After many years of inhumane abuse at the hands of his father, he died a meaningless death. But instead of fading away, his existence persisted. Even now, he could vividly remember the moment in which he was murdered.

His was a rare situation, to be sure. And in many ways, a decidedly unfortunate one.

Kaito Sena mused on that fact as he found himself being killed.

As the hands tightened around his neck, he realized that it was all just a dream.

I gotta say, it’s pretty unpleasant having to relive my death in my dreams and not even be able to wake up when I want to.

It was something that had already happened. There was no way to stop it. His feeble body had no hope of fighting off the large man who was straddling him. Resisting would only make the despair last longer.

And so yet again, he got strangled to death atop that damp tatami mat.

His arteries and windpipe gave way. His spine creaked under the pressure. A dry snapping noise echoed out.

Then it happened.

“Taaaaaaaaaaaake that!”

“Hurgh!”

An absurdly carefree voice rang through the air, and as it did, an intense blow struck Kaito straight in the chest.

The shock from the blow immediately snapped him awake, and his limbs went stiff as he contorted in pain.

He blinked, then realized that he was lying on a dry sheet. The solid stone ceiling above him filled his view. It had no fluorescent lights, nor did it have any stains. It wasn’t the room he’d lived in when he was alive.

Kaito frowned. Where was he, and what was he doing there?

Then at long last, he finally remembered the grave, hard-to-believe reality of his situation.

Ah, that’s right. I…

…reincarnated in another world.

He gingerly glanced to his side. Standing beside his bed was the exact person he’d expected.

Her black hair was long and lustrous, her skin was so fair that it seemed almost translucent, and her eyes were as red as jewels. She was wearing a

bondage dress composed of leather straps that just barely covered her breasts, and her arms were crossed in front of her.

And as for her shapely, high-heeled leg, it was buried in Kaito's stomach.

Now Kaito had a clearer picture of what was going on. That impact from a moment ago had been her giving him an ax kick.

He almost voiced a complaint but stopped the moment before the words left his mouth. His self-preservation instincts were screaming at him to shut up. He shifted his gaze over to the window. Golden light was leaking in through its shutters. Gears turned in Kaito's head as he sorted through the new information.

Dawn had long since broken. At the moment, he was working as a butler, despite his protests.

And his master was none other than the young woman who had just struck him in the chest.

The proud wolf and the lowly sow. The peerless sinner.

The Torture Princess—Elisabeth Le Fanu.

She was already up and dressed, and he was still lying on his bed.

It was becoming clear to Kaito why she had kicked him.

"I see you're up early, Miss Elisabeth… No, yeah, I'm just up late."

"Ah, so you're *aware* you've overslept, then, Kaito? 'Tis some nerve you have, indulging yourself in indolence beyond even that of your master."

Elisabeth's smile was as malevolent as it was beautiful. Kaito's face blanched. Now he'd gone and done it.

And with that, Kaito Sena greeted the morning—

—part of a long series of cruel, bizarre days.

*

Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess, was a peerless sinner. She had murdered countless people, starting with the population of her own fiefdom. But that tyranny of hers didn't last long. The Church captured her. By all rights, she should have been put to death on the spot. However, her execution was delayed.

Her order was to do some good for the world before she was to be killed at the stake. And so began the Torture Princess's crusade against the remaining thirteen demons and their contractors, leaving aside the already-captured Kaiser.

Demons were higher entities that destroyed the world and fed on the pain of God's creations.

And Kaito himself had already gotten a glimpse of how horrifying they could be.

He'd seen the work of the Knight, weakest of the fourteen, firsthand.

Everything was still fresh in his mind, how the Knight had attacked the innocent villagers with atrocities so vile that they had made Kaito want to avert his eyes. But perhaps the most gruesome atrocity of all had been the demon getting *Drawn and Quartered*—the punishment that Elisabeth inflicted on the Knight for his sins.

No matter which side Kaito looked at, hell was all that awaited his gaze.

Outside the battles, though, Kaito's life was actually fairly peaceful.

Well, under some definitions of the word, at least.

Can you really call a life with this many flying plates in it "peaceful," though? Not sure about that one.

"This! Is! Viiiiiiiiiiiiile!"

Kaito crossed his arms and pondered that thought. As he did, some stewed tongue with mashed potatoes came hurtling toward him. He didn't even have to look to know that Elisabeth was the culprit. The crime fit her MO.

The plate then turned around like a boomerang and began miraculously making its way back. Kaito caught it as it sprayed sauce through the air. He shook his head in exasperation.

"You know, I tried to make the menu as idiotproof as possible. Don't tell me I screwed even *that* up."

"I have a taste, as I'm sure you're aware. A preference for organ meat. But I'll have you know that even I have my limits! I bite in, expecting the sumptuous harmony of meat and vegetables to fill my mouth, and what I receive instead is the hellish flavor of blood! The vegetables are so mushy that they've lost any semblance of texture, yet somehow, the tongue manages to be hard as a rock! Is your aim to shatter my teeth?! This meal is an affront to all five senses!"

“I’m sure your teeth are gonna be fine. And also, I feel like I say this a lot, but you’ve got a crazy knack for food criticism, you know that?”

“This is no time to be idly admiring my talents! Haven’t you even a shred of remorse, you dullard?!”

Elisabeth hurled her fork at him, and it buried itself smack-dab in the middle of his forehead. Its handle bobbed up and down.

Kaito calmly withdrew the utensil from his brow. Blood comically gushed out like a fountain. However, that was of little concern. Thanks to the fact that he had the body of a golem, Kaito was more or less immortal, and his experiences back in life had left him well accustomed to pain. “Good grief,” he muttered as he pressed the cuff of his unbecoming butler outfit against the wound.

Elisabeth trembled with tears in her eyes. Kaito took the plate that he’d put off to the side ahead of time and handed it to her.

“Y’know, I figured that organs might be a little heavy for breakfast anyway, so I made this as well.”

“Thanks to your sloth, it’s already well past time for lunch, but I do appreciate the rare display of competen… Well now. What exactly is this supposed to be?”

“I made those shish kebabs last time, so I figured that frying an egg would be a piece of cake, but, uh…I kinda figured out a way to screw it up.”

“’Tis pitch-black, this egg! Nothing but crisp! Apologize to the yolk, the white, and the chick they could have been!”

As she shouted her oddly specific instructions, Elisabeth knocked her second meal off the table just the same as she had her first. Kaito could practically *see* the cat ears drooping atop her head. The Torture Princess was a peerless sinner, it was true, but she had a certain childish side to her as well. Eating delicious things filled her with an innocent joy, and tasting unpleasant food made her so dejected that it was almost pitiful.

Kaito nodded sympathetically. It was a sorry sight. Elisabeth snapped her head up.

“Answer me this now—why do you have a look on your face that suggests you’re not the one to blame?!”

“Miss Elisabeth, please put down the knife. If I lose too much blood, I really will die.”

Elisabeth growled menacingly. Kaito decided to make a break for it.

His blood was full of the Torture Princess’s mana, and losing too much of it would cause his soul to leak right out of his body. It was his one true weakness. Even if not for that, though, he still wanted to avoid angering Elisabeth any further.

Otherwise, I’ll end up on the Iron Chair!

“Best to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Choosing to heed that idiom, which he’d heard back when he was alive, he headed to the kitchen to clean up the mess he’d made while cooking.

*

Elisabeth had summoned Kaito because she needed someone to take care of her chores.

In fact, that was the *only* reason she summoned him. When you got down to it, the story was actually kind of absurd.

The thing was, Elisabeth herself hadn't had any intention of summoning someone from another world.

She needed a servant so she could fully devote herself to her battles against the demons, but she also had conditions as to who they could be. If she accidentally ended up hiring someone evil, the Church might suspect her of trying to rise up against them. So to avoid drawing any unwarranted suspicion, Elisabeth made sure to summon someone who was "sinless." Because nothing Kaito did in life had warranted his brutal death, he fit that criterion. The fact that he got drawn from another world was purely a coincidence.

Unfortunately, though, Kaito's domestic skills were downright nonexistent.

His disastrous cooking hardly needed to be mentioned, and he wasn't particularly great at any other chores, either. He was in no way the right man for the job. As far as everything other than food was concerned, though, Elisabeth was actually pretty lenient. She never ordered him to do anything more complicated than *"clean this room"* or *"wash what laundry needs washing."* Kaito took full advantage of this fact, and most of the work he did was fairly sloppy. However, the one thing he did make sure to do every day without fail was clean Elisabeth's bedroom. He was lazy, but he wasn't an idiot.

Even though it belonged to the castle's master, Elisabeth's bedroom was fairly plain. Kaito knew that touching any of her belongings was a dangerous proposition, but the cleaning itself was relatively painless. Each day, Kaito dusted the few pieces of furniture she kept, then changed her bedsheets so he could hand-wash and dry them. Then he would work around Elisabeth's afternoon catnap and look for a chance to carry her down mattress and pillow to a room with a balcony so he could air them out. He had no idea how people were actually supposed to clean those kinds of things, so he was basically just playing it by ear.

Once he was done with all that, he would generally then get to work cleaning the hallways and other rooms.

Sometimes, he would end up getting chased around by moving suits of armor and have to hide in the reservoir, where he would gaze in awe at the undines swimming about. That would usually last him until the evening. Then he would get to work preparing dinner, drawing Elisabeth's bath, and picking out wine for her to indulge herself in.

Such was his routine, day in, day out.

Today, though, he had a different plan. He headed to the rear garden.

The reason for that was simple—the weeds were making a play to expand their territory. If he didn't act fast, they would overtake the garden in no time. However, he quickly began doubting that decision.

"*Whew…* Man, first the oversleeping, and now it feels like I've been nodding off all day…"

Kaito let out a big yawn as he wrenched the weeds from the ground. That area was often overcast, but the sun had decided to show its face that day. It was the kind of warm weather that made one's eyelids naturally droop.

Plus, because of his nightmare, Kaito hadn't exactly gotten a good night's rest.

It would probably be smarter to go back inside, where it was cooler. However, he had just started to make some decent progress on the weeds.

"Still, how carefree does a guy have to be to nod off in…*yaaaawn*…the Torture Princess's castle?"

Kaito began muttering to himself to try and stay awake. The sheer thought of doing something like that would be enough to make anyone from this world gape in horror. Ever since he died, though, Kaito had been having a difficult time registering emotions like fear or alarm.

"Now that I think about it, I had to do a lot of messed-up stuff back in my old life. Moving around bodies that I wasn't sure were alive or not, selling drugs, spreading quicklime over rooms that were covered in blood… If it weren't for the demon battles, this life would probably actually be nicer than my last one. *Sigh.* Man, screw those demons."

Kaito shook his head in annoyance and rose to his feet. With a large bundle of weeds tucked under his arm, he turned around.

There, atop the ground that he'd just finished clearing, *was a dead body*.

The moment he saw it, Kaito realized something.

Huh, I guess I really did nod off.

This was a dream. It had to be.

The corpse in front of him couldn't possibly exist.

Everything about it was just too damn strange.

The body was definitely dead. Yet even so, it was *moving*. All its skin was brutally stretched out, and one of its sides was covered in thin strings. Now, the phrase *all its skin* wasn't totally accurate. The corpse was split in half down the middle, and the cross section had been *torn to shreds*. It was like it had been attached to something before being forcibly ripped off, like a caterpillar stuck to a roll of sticky tape.

Its fluttering scraps of leftover skin swam hazily through the air, accompanied by a series of black strings.

The corpse tilted its head and peered at Kaito from a strange angle. It looked like it was in constant agony, and tears dribbled from its bare, lidless eyes.

Kaito couldn't help but let out a low gasp. But it wasn't out of fear.

It was out of sympathy, and out of *affection*.

Man…it hurts, doesn't it?

An eternity of pain with no hope for salvation was a cruel thing to have to suffer through.

It was a scary, scary fate.

"C'mon now, don't cry."

It was supposed to be a dream, but when Kaito let out his murmur, his voice had a strangely clear ring to it. He looked down at the ground. It was covered in red. Blood was gushing forth from the corpse without stopping. The viscous way it was spreading seemed oddly graphic for a dream, but Kaito couldn't quite put his finger on what felt so strange about it.

He tilted his head to the side and took a step forward.

"Don't worry, *I'm coming*."

Something was off.

However, he couldn't tell what.

He approached the corpse with long strides. His gait was oddly brisk and nimble, to the point where even he could tell something was off. The corpse extended its one remaining arm toward him. He reached out for it in kind.

The fingers of the dead and the fingers of the living were about to meet.

The moment before they could, though, the ground exploded right in front of Kaito.

"Whoa!"

The force from the impact knocked him back, and the weeds he'd been carrying got scattered all around him.

Right before his vision shot upward, he saw the body get impaled by stakes. However, no new blood came flowing from it. Instead, the grisly corpse merely vanished without a sound. Now that he was sprawled out on the ground, Kaito looked up at the clear blue sky.

An idle thought drifted through his mind.

See? I knew it was a dream.

No demon attack would ever take such a pathetic form, and the only other way that such a strange event could take place was in a dream.

Why was it, though, that he'd felt as if it were his duty to rush over to the corpse, touch it as quickly as possible, take its hand, share its pain, and assimilate it?

Surely, there was no good reason for him to have been so bizarrely impatient.

Wait, hold on a sec. What the hell was that about "assimilating" it?

A chill ran down Kaito's spine. However, that emotion quickly grew dull and got replaced with a crushing wave of fatigue. A thought passed through his thoroughly confused mind.

Well, no biggie, I guess… It was just a dream, after all… Now then, gotta figure out how I'm supposed to wake up.

Suddenly, Kaito remembered an old wives' tale he'd once heard. Apparently, if you went to sleep in a dream, it would make you wake up in

the real world. Kaito took a deep breath, then relaxed his arms and legs and slowly closed his eyes.

The blue sky was overtaken by darkness.

Then his vision cut out entirely.

*

"Taaaaaaaaaaaake that!"

"Hurgh!"

An absurdly carefree voice rang through the air, and as it did, an intense blow struck Kaito straight in the chest.

The shock from the blow immediately snapped him awake, and his limbs went stiff as he contorted in pain. He blinked, then realized that he was lying on the hard ground. There was a pile of uprooted weeds by him that was pricking him in the arms and legs.

The clear blue sky above him filled his view.

Kaito frowned. Where was he, and what was he doing there?

He gingerly glanced at the spot where the strike had landed. Atop him was the exact person he'd expected. She was looking down at him with a catlike beauty, and her arm was buried in Kaito's gut. It was a brilliantly executed elbow strike.

"You know, I figured you'd go for another leg attack, but it's the arm this time, huh?"

"Hmhm, know now that I am a master of every combat technique known to— That's not important right now, Kaito! First you oversleep, then you see fit to take a siesta on top of that?!"

"Huh, yeah, I guess I did."

Elisabeth hopped to her feet, then crossed her arms as she shouted her accusation.

Kaito hurriedly rose as well, and Elisabeth angrily arched her eyebrows as she went on.

"And what's more, you didn't even take it in a proper bed. The garden, Kaito?! Just how sleepy were you?!"

"Uhhh, yeah, you got me there."

"In a more righteous world, you'd be in Thumbscrews this very moment! Go on then, weep in joy at my mercy and magnanimity!"

"And which world's the one where that logic makes sense, exactly? … Wait, huh? I *was* asleep, right?"

Everything Elisabeth just pointed out should have been true. He himself remembered having been asleep. However, he tilted his head to the side. Something didn't add up.

All of a sudden, he remembered how bizarre the entity he saw in his dream was.

What was that thing?

He glanced around the garden, but the bisected corpse was gone, and there were no traces of the fresh bloodstain. Kaito breathed a sigh of relief. *I guess it was a dream after all*. Suddenly, though, he frowned.

There was something strange about a particular patch of the ground. The soil was disturbed, like something had exploded up from underneath it. It was the kind of thing you'd expect to see on a battlefield.

It's almost as though…a stake burst up from under the ground… Nah, there's no way.

"By the way, Kaito."

"Yes, Miss Elisabeth? However might I be of service?"

"Oh, drop the forced politeness. Anyhow, if you have the time to be brazenly napping like that, then you must surely be bored to death. 'Tis fortunate for you, then, that I have the perfect job for those idle hands of yours. Come along now. And be chipper about it."

"Okay, so I'll admit that I was napping, but that doesn't mean I'm—OW!"

"Oh, shut up! Just come!"

Elisabeth grabbed Kaito by the earlobe. It would seem that resistance was futile.

He began reluctantly following her, his eyes as forlorn as those of a calf being taken to market. The two of them left the garden. For some reason, though, Kaito decided to take a quick glance back.

…Huh?

When he did, he saw it.

At some point, a crimson pool had spread across the ground like a putrid swamp. Sticky-looking foam bubbled on its surface. However, it vanished in the blink of an eye like a fleeting mirage. All that remained was the dry ground.

Kaito turned his gaze back in the direction they were heading and continued after Elisabeth a good deal less reluctantly than before.

I'm seeing things. Yep, definitely just seeing things.

After all, the alternative was that he *wasn't*—

—and if that were the case, then that crimson swamp was an ominous omen indeed.

*

Kaito followed Elisabeth down a set of stairs, and the two of them arrived underground.

He stepped down onto the stone floor. The long passageway that stretched before him reeked of mold and was turned at a corner partway down.

The corridors beneath the castle were laid out in a complex maze, and they were filled with mysterious groaning, which evoked the sense of a

labyrinth containing a monster. In fact, it wouldn't be surprising if there really was a monster down here. Kaito glared straight ahead.

There was something important that Elisabeth kept in the room at the end of that hallway—the teleportation circle etched in her blood. However, it would seem that that wasn't what they were here for. She selected one door from amid the innumerable rows of them.

Then she kicked it open with all her might.

"Saaaaays me!"

"Why's it always gotta be the violent option with you?"

Exasperated as he was, Kaito peered into the room from beside her. The inside was terribly cramped. It looked like a dungeon that had been designed to psychologically torture its prisoner. However, that wasn't the room's true purpose. Instead, there was a strange object installed in its center.

What, it's a glowing glass ball? No…

It couldn't be anything that simple. However, it was true that the clear orb was filled with a crimson light.

This light was composed in the shape of a flower. A moment after it bloomed, its petals fell off. Then they transformed into butterfly wings in midair. The butterflies flapped about, then gathered together back into a flower. And thus, the light began its transformation anew.

The cycle repeated, never ceasing.

Elisabeth pointed at the strange orb.

"'Tis a magic device I tested out many ages ago, then promptly forgot all about. But when I saw you plagued with those nightmares of yours and constantly fatigued, I suddenly remembered it existed."

"I get this weird feeling that I'd be better off if you hadn't."

"Oh, no need to sound so suspicious. 'Tis but a device designed to prevent nightmares."

"A device designed to prevent nightmares?"

Kaito parroted Elisabeth's words back at her. That sounded harmless enough, not to mention extremely handy. Given the option, he'd rather not relive the moment of his death any more than he had to. He couldn't help but be interested.

When she saw Kaito's reaction, Elisabeth curled the corners of her lips into a malevolent smile.

"Of course, any small error when using it would leave you unable to return, permanently crippled, or something to that effect."

"Okay, that's gonna be a reeeeal hard pass from me!"

In times like these, discretion was the better part of valor. Kaito immediately made to dash out into the corridor. The moment before he could flee, however, Elisabeth snatched him up by the collar. Behind him, she began making an unusually enthusiastic declaration.

"No, no, it'll work! I haven't the faintest shred of proof to support that notion, but I have this strange feeling that you'll do just great!"

“That’s a little too important to leave up to a notion, don’t you think?! Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! If you’re gonna shove someone into something, at least make sure it works first!”

“You’re a man! Show some spine! Worry not—if anything happens, I’ll be sure to retrieve your ashes!”

“Oh, so we’re just working under the *assumption* that I’m gonna die… Hey, wait, ahhhhhhhhhh!”

Kaito’s resistance was in vain, and he found his back getting pressed against the glass ball.

Then—

—with a brief, unsatisfying *shoop*—

“Huh?”

—Kaito got sucked into the ball.

*

The world was filled—

—to the very brim—

—with crimson flowers in full bloom.

It was a bewitchingly beautiful sight, but an endlessly ominous one as well.

As he lay sprawled atop the flower field, a shallow thought passed through Kaito’s amazed mind. He retracted his statement from back in the garden.

“…Okay, I take it all back. Demons or not, this life is way more messed up than my last one.”

No good could ever come of a world with magic in it. However, just lying there lamenting that fact wasn’t going to get him anywhere. Crimson flower petals scattered in his wake as he stood.

“All right, first order of business: Let’s figure out what the hell happened to me.”

Kaito glanced around, trying his best to stay levelheaded. Unlike the ground, which was as red as a sea of blood, the sky was muddled and gray. Butterflies made of crimson light glittered through the air with a dim glow behind them as they continued their lively dance all the way to the horizon line.

As beautiful as it all was, it was decidedly bizarre. Kaito wasn’t sure where to go.

He looked around again, hoping to find some sign. A moment later, he did a double take.

Something weird was floating there.

“Whoa, what’s that thing?!”

“Bakuuuuuuuuu.”

“Whoa, it made a noise.”

There was something round in the middle of the field. It was some sort of mysterious black-and-white creature.

Kaito began thinking to try and figure out what it was. The only black-and-white animal that immediately came to mind was a panda.

This thing looks different, though. Wait, I feel like I might have seen one in a picture book back in school—some sort of black-and-white animal that had something to do with dreams… It was so long ago, though, and I only went to school for a short bit, so my memory's a little fuzzy.

"Bakuuuuuuuuu!"

"Whoa, it made a noise again."

As Kaito leaped back, something dawned on him. The strange creature was making an odd noise, but its actual cry probably sounded different than that. His golem body's translation function was probably just coming up with something that it figured was "close enough."

After letting out a dissatisfied groan, the animal went silent. Kaito steeled his nerves and walked toward it. The creature was floating in the air with its eyes closed, as relaxed as a baby in the womb.

Seeing how adorable it looked helped alleviate Kaito's fears a bit. He timidly reached out to touch it.

Suddenly, with a big *chomp*, the creature snatched up Kaito's hand in its mouth. Kaito was a few seconds slow on the uptake, but he eventually let out a shout.

"Hey, don't eat me!"

"Baku. Munch, much, munch."

Fortunately, it didn't hurt. Apparently, it wasn't actually eating his flesh. However, his hand grew wet with drool all the same. The munching sound went on as the creature continued gently gnawing on him. A sensation came over Kaito that felt like he was having something sucked out of his body.

He tilted his head to the side. *How odd.* Then out of the blue, the creature's body began swelling up.

"Whoa! Are you okay there, buddy?!"

"……"

The black-and-white creature didn't answer, instead choosing to persist in its unnerving silence. All the while, it continued inflating. It was almost like some sort of balloon he was blowing into. Its fuzzy body grew rounder and rounder, and then—

—with a *pop*—

—it burst.

"…Huh?"

Kaito let out a dumbfounded yelp. However, the creature's body hadn't actually exploded. Instead, its skin merely split and peeled off from its top down. Afterward, it was left as a sphere of muscle fibers decorated with lard and veins. The creature had been reduced to a horrible blob. Then it began pulsating in midair, like it was the heart of very world itself.

And its horrible transformation didn’t stop there. Next, it began melting, losing its form like a piece of fruit rotting. Chunks of meat began cascading off it.

They fell down like a dark rain, then seeped into the ground in the spaces between the flowers.

And eventually, the world—

—stopped moving in turn.

*

“What…the hell?”

The eternal cycle had come to an abrupt conclusion.

The butterflies, midway through flying through the air and falling down as flower petals, froze in place.

Kaito looked around in a panic. He was pretty sure he hadn’t done anything wrong, but his heart was pounding up a storm all the same. Something bad was going to happen; he could feel it. He braced himself. However, no such disaster came.

Kaito breathed a small sigh of relief, and the tension flooded out of his body. But he had let his guard down too quickly.

The world began moving.

It was like it had just finished “perceiving” him.

The crimson petals all cascaded to the ground in unison and crumbled away into nothing. All that remained were the flowers’ stems and stamens, and those then hardened and changed color and material. Now they were a bed of silver needles.

The butterflies’ wings followed suit, thinning out and sharpening into knives. The entire space was filled with objects designed to hurt people.

Kaito stood stock-still in the newly silver world. His voice grew hoarse.

“…You’ve gotta be shitting me.”

If he took so much as a single step forward, the needles would impale his feet, and the knives would slice his skin to ribbons.

At a loss for what to do, Kaito gave the cruel world a quick glance over. However, he didn’t see any way to reverse the transformation.

The strange creature had melted, and it didn’t look like it was coming back. Kaito’s one lead had quite literally vanished. That said, just standing there wasn’t going to get him anywhere. Kaito mulled over his options.

There’s gotta be some way for me to get out of here. If I make my way to the edge of this world—the glass ball, that is—maybe I’ll be able to call Elisabeth for help.

The problem was, if he moved even a little, he would end up getting hurt by that same world. It was a situation that would induce despair in just about anyone.

Kaito took a deep breath, then slowly let it out.

*Welp…*not like I have much of a choice*.*

That about summed it up.

Kaito placed a foot atop the needles and carefully took a step forward. When he did, the needles' silver prongs pierced his foot clean through.

Seeing them burst through the top of his shoe, Kaito grimaced. He lifted his foot up, and a horrible slurping noise sounded out as it came free of the needles, which were now covered in disgusting globs of fat. Blood gushed from his wounds.

As agony shot through him, he took another step, once more bringing his foot down on the needles of his own volition.

The moment he did, a melodic voice echoed through the air.

"You fear pain, aye, but you're far too accustomed to it. I daresay that that contradiction there is where your warped personality stems from."

"Huh? Wait, that voice… Elisabeth?"

Kaito frantically glanced around. For a moment, he even forgot that his foot was being impaled. That was a bad move. He tried to twist his body to the side to get a better look, but because his foot was still stuck, he ended up losing his balance.

He toppled over, and the carpet of needles quickly drew closer.

Oooh, I don't like this.

The prospect of being in agony—

—and of dying in agony—

—and of being in constant agony yet unable to die—

was a most unpleasant prospect indeed.

That was the fact that Kaito mused on as he fell helplessly toward the needles. The moment before he got run through, though, he stopped.

Someone behind him—

—had just grabbed his hand tight.

"…Huh?"

"Heeeave…"

Then they began dragging him upward. It was almost anticlimactic how casually he got pulled up through the air.

It felt just like the time his soul got unceremoniously yanked—

—and plucked out of his original world.

*

"…Ah!"

By the time Kaito realized what was going on, he was already sitting atop something black-and-white.

When he looked down, he discovered that it was the round creature from before. It was the exact same shape—just a lot bigger.

The large creature floated gently through the air as it carried Kaito on its back. He didn't understand what was going on in the slightest. What he did know, though, was that he didn't have any time to waste gawking at the strange beast.

He quickly glanced to his side. There, he found the exact person he'd expected.

He pointed his finger straight at her.

"ELISABEEEEEEEEEETH!"

"Oh, hello there, Kaito."

Elisabeth gave him a breezy greeting and a one-handed wave. She was sitting with her arms perched atop her knees and the scarlet inside of her dress tucked underneath her. Kaito raised his voice in indignation.

"Don't you 'oh, hello' me, dammit! Do you have any idea what I just went through because of you?!"

"Well, you say that, but even I hadn't the faintest idea that your nightmares' cause would take such a form. And besides, who exactly was it who refused to wait for me, striding across those needles on his own like an utter fool?"

"Well, it does sound bad when you put it that way… Wait, hold on a minute. *This* is the cause of my nightmares?"

"That it is. 'Tis a contradictory sight indeed."

Elisabeth gazed down at the transformed field of flowers as she spoke. Still seated, Kaito scooted over until he was right next to her.

All of a sudden, he realized that his foot didn't hurt anymore. His wounds were gone without a trace. However, the world of needles and knives showed no sign of reverting to its original state. Overwhelmed by the sheer heartlessness of the sight, Kaito asked a question.

"Wait…what does this have to do with my nightmares at all?"

"To pinpoint the precise source of another's nightmares, one must first dive deep into their memories. However, this is but an experimental device, and such a complex feat is beyond it. Instead, it displays a symbolic manifestation of the fear that drives its subject's nightmares. What you see before you is the result. You fear pain, yet you're accustomed to it and, at times, even accept it willingly. As I said, contradictory. 'Tis perverse, and that means a lot coming from me."

"…Huh."

"A sea of knives and needles, eh…? 'Tis a veritable cage of pain, impossible to ever escape from."

An eternity of agony was an unpleasant prospect indeed.

That was definitely how Kaito felt. That was what he was afraid of. That was what he was used to.

The two of them went quiet, and for a time, it was silent atop the strange creature's back. The pair just sat there. All of a sudden, though, Elisabeth arched her back and stretched her arms all the way up. Her breasts bounced precariously beneath their leather belts. After bringing her arms back down, Elisabeth exhaled.

"To be frank, though, it doesn't matter to me in the slightest."

"Don't you think that's a little *too* honest?"

“Ha. You think your trauma is special? What you fear, what you find unpleasant, what weight you bear…I’ve no intention of asking the details, nor would they hold my interest if I did.”

“That’s…fair, I guess.”

“That said, I do aim to obliterate this place now.”

“…Say what?”

Elisabeth’s proclamation came completely out of left field.

Kaito blinked. He hadn’t quite registered what she had said just yet. As he gave his dumbfounded reply, he looked around. When she said “this place,” she must have meant the space they were currently in. When that fact finally clicked, he worriedly shot her a question.

“Now, um, Miss Elisabeth, are you really sure that’s a good idea?”

“It matters not! Besides, such was the purpose this device was built for in the first place!”

“Ah, so what I’m hearing is that you have no proof at all that we’re gonna be okay.”

As Kaito quickly came to that realization, Elisabeth rose to her feet.

Her dress flared out behind her like a cloak as she lorded over the world of silver. Several butterflies landed on her luscious black hair. Adorned perilously with their bladed wings, she smiled in satisfaction.

“When you put someone in the device, it reproduces the symbolic cause of their nightmares. However, that alone is but the first step. The way it ends the nightmares is by having a third party destroy the reproduction, thereby freeing the subject’s mind. A violent configuration, to be sure.”

“I feel like that doesn’t make any sense at all. Is this really gonna make the nightmares stop?”

“Oh, there’s certainly no guarantee of that! Most of the developers of large-scale magic devices such as this end up going mad!”

“I’m starting to sense a trend with these unfounded statements you keep making.”

“That said, ridiculous as the ideas behind it may be, ’twas well worth testing it out. We’ve not had any battles as of late, and I could feel my body growing duller by the day… Plus, I just went through a rather unpleasant experience.”

Elisabeth finished with a low murmur. She cracked her knuckles.

Kaito tilted his head to the side in confusion. Something must have happened that he didn’t know about. However, there was no time to ask questions. Elisabeth was making her move. Beneath them, the mysterious creature let out an apprehensive “Bakuuuu.” It sensed danger. However, Elisabeth paid its complaint no heed.

To the contrary, in fact, she treated its cry as a signal to let the destruction commence.

She reached out into empty space, and a vortex of darkness and crimson flower petals formed around her pale hand.

Then she drew a long sword from within.

“Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal!”

The runes inscribed in its blade flashed crimson.

Anyone who saw them would have their meaning driven straight into their brain.

You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.

“Witches’ Dance!”

Elisabeth swung the sword straight down.

To Kaito, it looked like flames were billowing off it. However, that was just an optical illusion.

In truth, the sword had merely cut through the air. Down below them, though, changes were occurring in the silver landscape.

The air was shimmering with heat haze, and the ground had been transformed into a vast sheet of burning metal. If anyone had been standing on it, the heat would have forced them to hop around like a madman. The metal plane’s temperature rose mercilessly, growing higher and higher by the moment. Its silver flowers drooped and sagged as they melted. The intense heat was permeating every inch of this bounded world.

And Kaito and Elisabeth were no exception.

The massive black-and-white creature rose higher into the air at the last minute, but not even it could escape the effects of the change. It flailed its stubby arms and legs about to protest the heat. Kaito had to cling tight to its back to avoid being thrown off.

“H-hey, Elisabeth! At this rate, you’re gonna end up burning us to death, too!”

“Hmm. That is a problem, isn’t it? To be quite frank, I never actually considered that possibility.”

“Why wasn’t that the *first* thing you considered?!” Kaito shouted in visible panic.

Elisabeth, on the other hand, was inexplicably as calm as a cucumber. She swung her sword down once more. *There’s no way…*, thought Kaito. And yet there was.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Elisabeth made her bold declaration.

“Now, ’tis time to seal the deal.”

She swung her sword down, and darkness and crimson flower petals surged forth. A series of chains went flying as the ashen sky absorbed the shock wave. Elisabeth continued attacking the world without stopping.

Kaito braced himself. He had no idea what was going to happen to them. The sky creaked before his very eyes.

“Wha—?”

Then a noise as shrill as glass shattering filled the air.

The world built of pain was broken. Shards of the sky cascaded down like shooting stars.

The image of the countless glittering fragments burned itself into Kaito’s retinas.

As the thousands of scraps of light rained down from overhead, all of a sudden—

Shoop.

"…Huh?"

—a disappointingly brief noise echoed out—

—and Kaito and Elisabeth got launched outside.

*

"Taaaaaaaaaaaake that!"

"Hurgh!"

A shock ran through Kaito's body for the third time that day.

When he took the heel or elbow or whatever it was to the chest, his eyes snapped open.

His body went stiff as he contorted in agony, but he quickly rallied and got up. A dim, glowing ball sat in front of him. Its surface was covered in cracks, and it was emitting black-and-white smoke. He could faintly make out an annoyed "Bakuuuu" cry coming from somewhere, so it would seem that the events he'd just gone through hadn't been only a dream.

Elisabeth was standing beside the ball. She gave it a huffy frown as she looked down at its sorry state.

"What a flimsy piece of junk that turned out to be. For how dangerous a device it was, I'd have expected it to survive at least a single use."

"I bet it would have if you didn't use it like a lunatic."

Kaito shot her an exasperated rebuttal, but Elisabeth didn't respond to it. "Hmm," she murmured as she inspected the cracks. After giving the device a thorough once-over, she nodded. "Well, no matter. I'll just stick it back together later; I'm sure it'll be fine."

"I'm pretty sure it won't."

"Oh, have some faith. 'Tis nary a flaw in this world that a little welding can't fix."

"Oh yeah, this isn't gonna end well."

But right when Kaito was about to warn Elisabeth that her efforts were likely to accomplish little more than exacerbating the ball's already-critical damage, Elisabeth suddenly turned on her heel and shot him a question as casual as could be.

"And on another note, I take it your odd drowsiness is gone?"

"Huh? Oh, actually, now that you mention it, yeah… I guess today's just been one weird experience after another."

"If so, then I daresay you have me to thank. If you wish to drop to your knees and express your reverent gratitude, I certainly shan't stop you."

"Why? Just why?"

They were bold words, coming from the person who'd shoved him into a magical device against his will. Kaito squinted at her. However, it *was* true that she was the one who'd destroyed that world.

Wait, was she looking out for me…in her own weird kind of way, mind you?

Suddenly, Kaito was reminded of a few other things that had piqued his interest.

There were those traces of an explosion back in the garden. There was the way she'd said that she "just went through a rather unpleasant experience." And there was the way she'd acted as though something had just happened.

Could it be? Had she been working on his behalf, even before she stuck him in the ball?

It seemed like it might be possible, so Kaito decided to ask her. Before he could get the words out, though, Elisabeth turned once more.

"Now then, Kaito, 'tis almost dinnertime. Should my meal be late, I assume you've no objections to finding yourself atop the Ducking Stool."

"Actually, I think I have an objection or two."

Kaito took it all back.

Today, as always, Elisabeth Le Fanu's cruelty was in perfect form.

*

Even in the evenings, Kaito still had plenty of work to do.

First, he had to draw a hot bath for Elisabeth. Then he had to go around and check the magic lamps to see if any of them had gone out. And although it was an impossible task due to the castle's sheer size, he also had to make sure all the windows were closed and the doors were locked.

If Elisabeth wanted wine with her dinner, he had to go get that, too. All in all, his evening workload was nothing to sneeze at.

Once he was finally finished, Kaito staggered back to the servant quarters.

He made his way to his room and sat down on his bed. As he looked up at the ceiling, he let out a small murmur.

"God, I'm pooped."

Not only had his day been filled with all sorts of bizarre mayhem, but he'd also had to do a full day's workload on top of that. Plus, he didn't even know if that strange device had actually worked or not. After dinner, Elisabeth had brazenly made yet another proclamation.

"From today on, I suspect you'll have nightmares just the same as anyone! But I've a feeling that there may or may not be a chance that their frequency could well decrease!"

Kaito didn't even know where to start with that one. That was a whole lot of words for not a lot of certainty. Her proof, as always, was nowhere to be found. Strangely, though, he didn't find that fact all that upsetting.

A device that "reproduces the symbolic cause of nightmares" and ends them "by having a third party destroy the reproduction, thereby freeing the subject's mind," huh?

The entire sequence of events had been totally absurd, but he had to admit that it had been kind of refreshing to watch the world of pain get destroyed. It made him feel like the thorn winding its way through his chest had lightened up a little.

As they fell, those thousands of scraps of light—

—had looked like beautiful, radiant stars.

…Huh? Wait, was that thing I saw out in the garden a symbol of the pain that caused my nightmares, too?

Confused, Kaito tilted his head to the side. He still wasn't sure what that phantom had really been. Maybe it was just a new spin on his nightmare, but he found that hard to believe. He thought back over what it had looked like.

It had been in eternal pain, an agony that would never end.

It had been a corpse, yet even in death, it had still moved.

"…I can't come be by your side."

Him assimilating an entity that was going to suffer in pain for eternity wasn't an option. From now on, he served Elisabeth. As foolish of a servant as he may have been, he was all she had.

He didn't have time to spend the rest of his days grieving for an event that had long since passed.

Plus, he had no desire whatsoever to keep crying even after he died.

If I had to die…I'd rather do it happily, with no regrets.

It'd be nice if it were a situation where he could say, *This was for the best—*

—where he could do it for someone else's sake and go out with a smile on his face.

As that random thought passed through his mind, he collapsed backward onto the bed with his arms and legs sprawled out. He closed his eyes. Based on what Elisabeth had said, the magical device's effects were uncertain.

Would he have another nightmare tonight?

For a moment, Kaito was seized by worry. However, his exhaustion quickly won out, and he sank into a deep slumber.

*

That night, Kaito Sena had a dream.

A strange animal soared overhead, crying, "Bakuuuu," as it flew. It had a round back, and Elisabeth was riding atop it. As she and the creature bobbed gently through the air, she complained about how vile Kaito's cooking was.

Well, that's not very Torture Princess-y of her, Kaito exasperatedly mused.

It was a weird dream, to be sure—

—but it was about as far from a nightmare as they came.

✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 2 ✦✦✦✦

When I woke up, everyone there was dead.

Perhaps dead is putting it too lightly. They had been butchered beyond recognition.

It all started a short while before I saw that nightmarish spectacle.

One night, I decided to spend one of my precious few copper coins—

—on an inn room that was so cramped, it didn't even have a bed.

The torrential thunderstorm that had started up that evening didn't give me much of a choice. It was too far to the next town, there were no trees large enough to take cover under, and at that rate, I was liable to catch pneumonia.

And it seemed I wasn't alone in that. The building had little more to its name than a roof, but it was packed full of far more people than normal. In particular—

—a group of men with dangerous eyes—

took over most of the building as their own. They were slavers.

Once I realized that, I wrapped my head up tight with cloth and hid myself away in a corner.

But when I woke up from my shallow sleep, I was surrounded by a sea of carcasses.

The bodies didn't even look human anymore. All of them had been alive the night before, but now they'd been dismantled into piles of blood, flesh, and bone. As I stood surrounded by their indescribable chunks and liquids, I vacantly thought, How absurd. Those people had been moving around just hours before, and now they were nothing more than useless piles of gross, mushy stuff.

The sheer fear and disgust of the scene made my mind blank out. I felt like I was going to go mad.

But right as a spasmic laugh was about to escape my throat, I heard a voice and a light little hop.

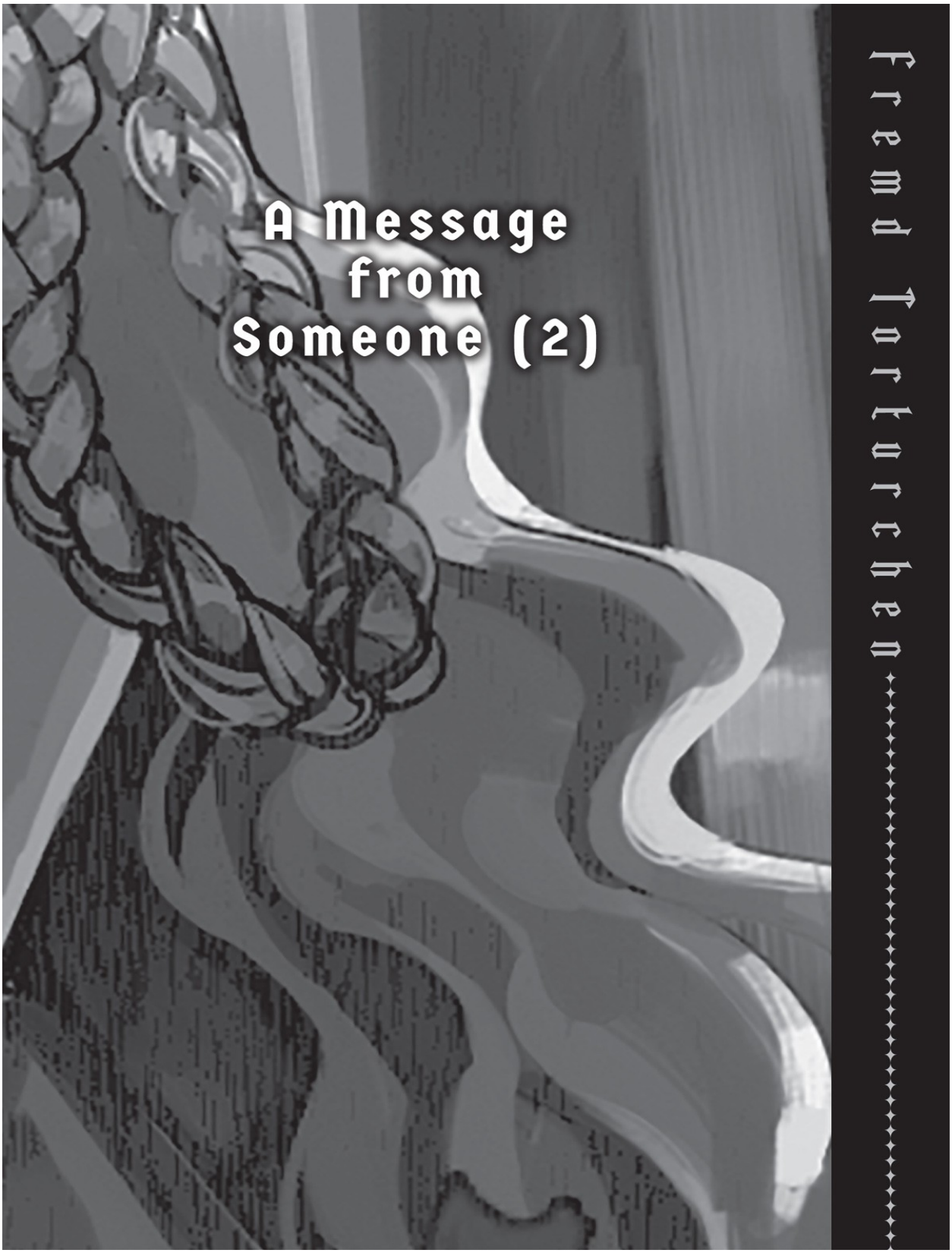
"Oh, there was someone still alive?"

A young girl stood before me. Her hair was white and fluffy, like a rabbit's, and it paired wonderfully with her blue dress.

It was an odd sight to see in a place of carnage like that. She smiled and did a little twirl.

"There!"

Then she lopped my arm off.


A Message
from
Someone (2)

A Message from Someone (2)

I’m at a little bit of a loss here.

As you can see, my words were able to get through to you. Now, I have no guarantee that they’re actually reaching you, but…let’s assume they are. Like a miracle.

But now that I have this once-in-a-lifetime chance, what should I use it to say?

Hmm…I suppose I should start by reviewing my assumptions.

First, that you live in this world, this fragile land that Diablo destroys and God constructs anew.

And second, that you, like everything else that exists, are one of God’s creations.

With that in mind, then as long as you’re not an exceedingly young child, then you’ve probably heard a dozen or two quotes of mine. Perhaps more, if you’re particularly scholarly or fond of folklore. For such quotes were written down and passed through the ages.

“She spoke thus,” they probably all started. However, I have an unfortunate truth I need to share with you.

Those were all lies. None of them were my words.

They may have been affectionate or perhaps filled with deep unspoken meaning, but none of them came from me. Never once did I speak of my memories, and never once did I record one of my thoughts. All those quotes you saw were thought up by someone else before being attributed to me.

That was how people embellished my story. They didn’t do it out of malice. They merely wanted me to be the manifestation of all their kindness, ideals, and admiration.

Most words, when spoken, serve as little more than vague annoyances. But that’s precisely why they’re more appealing than anything I actually said. Words thought up, chosen, and passed down through the ages by the masses hold much greater significance than those spoken on the spur of the moment by a single person. But as a result, I have no idea what it is I should say now.

After all, I have no way of making my true words surpass the false ones that others have passed off as mine. No, now that I think about it, that isn’t quite it, is it? It’s that I didn’t have anything I *wanted* to convey to you to begin with. Ah, that’s right. I…

…I have nothing I want to say.

Now I finally see. That was how it’s been this whole time, but this was the first moment I realized it consciously. There isn’t a single, solitary thing I want to say.

There are no morals I want to teach you, no examples I want to set. No, actually, let me be blunt here.

I never loved you people—

—and certainly not enough to want to leave you with my words.

✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 3 ✦✦✦✦

By all rights, I'm pretty sure I was supposed to die there.

Without even removing the cloth wrapped around my head—

—I keeled over backward from the shock.

But when I landed, the cloth came unraveled.

And my two rabbit ears sprang up from amid my tangled hair.

She probably also saw the fur growing from my cheeks and noticed my buckteeth as well, which were too long to be a human's.

I'm hideous to look at, I know. For a middle-aged man like me, my appearance is one of my greatest shames.

It's too sad to even laugh about, and sure enough, the girl's eyes went wide when she saw me.

Her beautiful, doll-like expression crumbled, and she let out a loud shout.

"Oh, oh no, Mr. Rabbit, your ears! Oh, I've gone and done it now! I messed up! Why am I always like this? Why I am always such a dumb, dumb dummy?! Father!"

"What's the matter, Alice? Ah...I see. You've gone and done it again."

"I did, didn't I, Father? Is he going to be okay? We can stick it back on, right? Can't we?"

A man had come up from the first floor when he heard the girl's voice.

Half of his face was covered by a crow mask, which seemed a rather odd thing to wear. I wasn't sure, but I got the impression that he might be a doctor or a teacher or something.

He looked down at my severed arm, oddly composed.

Then he sat down, picked it up, and placed it against my wound while chanting a spell.

I could feel the pain wane a little. However, the man shook his head.

"Dark magic is ill-suited for healing.

"A talented mage can forcibly reattach their own arm, but repairing someone else's is a much more difficult feat.

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but it's not a field I'm particularly talented at, nor one I have much experience with.

"I'm sorry, comrade. Please come with us. We'll make this right."

"Yes, we will! We'll get you all healed up, so please don't be mad! "I made an honest mistake, see; I didn't mean to cut off your arm... Well, I guess I did, but it wasn't out of malice... Well, it was, but I didn't realize who you were! Don't you worry!"

"You didn't realize who I was? ...'Comrade'? What...what are you people talking about?"

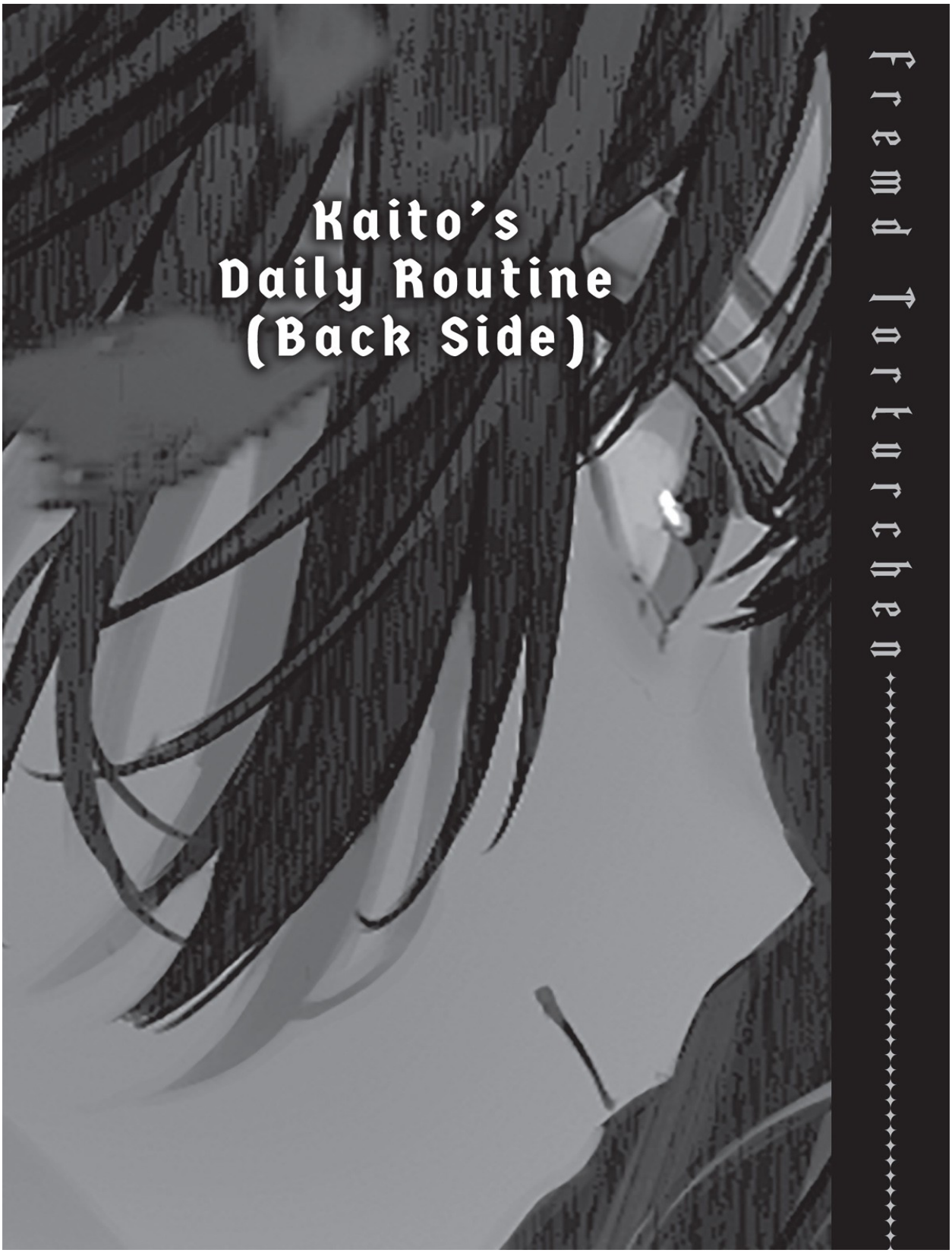
I had no idea what was going on, and in my confusion, I posed them a question.

The man wrapped my arm in some cloth, bound it tight, then stood.

As he had the girl draw a teleportation circle, he turned back toward me.

"You've been oppressed as well, haven't you?"

It was only then that I finally realized that he, too, was of mixed race.


Kaito's
Daily Routine
(Back Side)

Kaito’s Daily Routine (Back Side)

A few days ago, the Torture Princess summoned a soul.

Her demon-subjugation efforts took up most of her time, and she had never much cared for doing chores in the first place. As such, she decided to summon an “Unsullied Soul” to take care of her housework for her. However, that requirement was filled by a most unexpected individual. They were killed in a manner far crueler than their sins in life would warrant, true—but they also hailed from another world.

His name was Kaito Sena.

Now he was in charge of handling all the chores around her castle. Much to her dismay, though, Kaito’s technical skills were lacking across the board, and his cooking in particular was downright disastrous. If it weren’t for the one dish he did excel at, *purin*, Elisabeth would have strongly considered disposing of him.

And to top it all off, he hadn’t even started making her breakfast yet.

In all likelihood, he was oversleeping, a crime that well warranted a punishment of death.

“That Kaito… He certainly has some nerve, waking up after his master.”

When Elisabeth got hungry, she became much akin to a starving lion.

Her heels clicked loudly as she strode briskly down the dim, unadorned hallway. The servant quarters were cramped, and they had none of the colored windows, suits of armor, or stone statues decorating their walls like the rest of the castle did.

“He only just reincarnated here, and yet it’s as though he’s forgotten he’s in the Torture Princess’s castle already. Perhaps I’d best beat some respect for my majesty into him with the cat-o’-nine-tails… Hmm?”

All of a sudden, she ended her ominous soliloquy. She frowned and stopped in her tracks.

There was something in the middle of the hallway.

Or to be more precise, there was a peculiar figure wriggling and squirming in front of Kaito’s room.

The thing was “soft,” and it was stuck to his door, raggedly panting as it scraped its nails against the wood. Its body was split in half down the middle, making it look like the bizarre figure had been brutally torn to shreds. Flaps of skin dangled from the cross section, and for whatever reason, they were accompanied by a series of thin strings. On its other side, its heart was pressed against the door and rapidly pulsating.

Given the state of the thing, it was odd that it was even alive. And in fact, it wasn’t—it was “dead.”

It was nothing but a corpse, yet even so, it was writhing in pain.

In that sense, its very existence was contradictory. Despite the fact that it was dead, it was shedding fat tears and scratching at the door in agony.

All in all, it made for a rather sorry sight. The vast majority of people who saw it would have wanted to do something to help. Some might even feel guilty about how carefree their own lives were in comparison.

However, Elisabeth was not the vast majority of people. She coldly clicked her tongue.

“Unable to vanish, eh? Begone, now. You shan’t find what you seek here.”

The moment she rejected it, it froze in place. Then without displaying an ounce of displeasure or annoyance, it disappeared.

The vast pool of blood it had been accompanied with vanished as well.

It left nothing behind.

Hmph, Elisabeth scoffed. Irritated, she kicked Kaito’s door open.

After entering, she narrowed her eyes.

Golden light was leaking in through the room’s shutters, yet the darkness inside had yet to fade.

She had little doubt that that was due to the agonized plea the thing had been making though the door.

The weight of its grudge had sullied the very air.

Despite the bizarre situation he was in, though, Kaito himself was still fast asleep. However, when Elisabeth looked closer, she noticed that something was off about him. *Hmm*, she thought as she approached his bed. She peered at his face, and once she did, she realized exactly what was going on.

Kaito’s tongue was sticking out, and his body was convulsing.

The corrupted air was giving him a nightmare. And it wasn’t difficult to imagine what the nightmare was about.

“…’Tis but natural one would make such a face, I suppose.”

Elisabeth shrugged. Kaito Sena’s memories included the moment of his own death. His was a rare situation, to be sure. And in many ways, a decidedly unfortunate one. Elisabeth mused on that fact.

’Tis rather unpleasant, having a nightmare and being unable to wake up despite knowing it’s a dream.

As Kaito continued sleeping, his dream approached its climax. He began thrashing about, spraying drool and mucus every which way. He scratched at the air with his fingers, and tears rolled down his cheeks. *Help*, he mouthed to nobody in particular.

Before long, his neck was going to snap.

Elisabeth sighed. Then she raised her ravishingly shapely leg up high.

“Taaaaaaaaaaaake that!”

“Hurgh!”

Her ax kick struck Kaito straight in the abdomen.

The shock from the blow snapped him awake, and his limbs went stiff as he contorted in pain.

He blinked a few times. It looked like he was wondering where he was and what he was doing there. At long last, though, he seemed to remember the grave reality of his situation. He gingerly glanced at Elisabeth. He started to say something, then clamped his mouth shut at the last moment. It was rare moment of prudence, coming from him.

If he'd voiced so much as a single complaint, Elisabeth would have strung him up from the ceiling.

Instead, he shifted his gaze over to the window. His eyes went wide when he saw the light streaming in through the shutters.

Ah, so you've finally remembered your role and station, then? Dullard.

"I see you're up early, Miss Elisabeth… No, yeah, I'm just up late."

"Ah, so you're *aware* you've overslept, then, Kaito? 'Tis some nerve you have, indulging yourself in indolence beyond even that of your master."

Elisabeth's smile was as malevolent as it was beautiful. Kaito's face went pale.

And with that, Elisabeth Le Fanu greeted the morning—

—one of the next of a long series of unpleasant, bothersome days.

*

Her demon-subjugation efforts took up most of her time—that was the pretext under which Elisabeth had summoned Kaito Sena.

However, the truth of the matter differed greatly.

On all the days without demon battles, she was actually bored beyond belief.

Although she was giving the Church regular reports and sending out familiars in search of information, that was the sum total of her responsibilities. In truth, the actual reason she called forth a servant was merely because she despised doing chores.

As such, summoning Kaito freed her from having to do any of them. In theory, it should have been a happy ending. In practice, though, this only compounded her boredom. There were many things her stone castle was good at, but helping its inhabitants kill time wasn't on that list. But even so, she was neither shameless enough nor stupid enough to venture outside it. After all, the Torture Princess was a sinner without peer.

Like a prisoner, her food was the only pleasure afforded to her.

And thanks to Kaito, even that's been ruined… Well, nothing for it. May as well take a nap.

Elisabeth yawned and began making her way back to her bedroom.

After she killed the fourteen demons, she herself was destined to be burned at the stake. Until then, she intended to fritter away as much of the idle interim as she could. Before she could reach her room, though, she stopped.

She stared down the hallway, then crossed her arms in displeasure.

"Hmm. So it's back."

A trail of blood dotted the stone floor before her. It was vividly crimson, as though it had just been spilled. However, stepping in it didn't leave any footprints. The blood was nothing more than an illusion. Although it was visible, it was closer to a lingering thought than an actual object.

Elisabeth sighed. What to do, what to do?

"Urgh, dealing with this would be a headache and a half. Were I alone, I'd just as soon leave it be."

Unfortunately, though, her castle was currently also home to Kaito Sena. He was in real danger of being snatched up by the owner of this blood. In fact, given this morning's events, he might well have been the reason that it appeared in the first place.

"There you go again, making more trouble for your long-suffering master. See, this is precisely what makes you so foolish."

Elisabeth cursed her servant's name as she set off. She knew full well what a master's duty was. Kaito was carrying out his end of the deal and working as her servant, and that meant it was her responsibility to protect him.

The fact that his work was all sloppy and half-assed notwithstanding.

Well, it isn't as if I've anything better to do.

Perhaps this would make for a good way to kill time.

Elisabeth began casually following the trail of blood.

*

The farther she went, the more blood there was.

Elisabeth even started finding chunks of flesh and scraps of string floating in some of the larger drops.

Kaito's chores took him all over the castle, so he must have covered at least some of that ground before she did. Yet despite how gruesome a spectacle it was, he never came to report it to her. In all likelihood, that meant that he hadn't been able to see it.

He may hail from another world, but it's my blood that sustains his existence. How is it that he could see the main body yet was blind to such prominent tracks? Just how empty is that head of his?

It would appear that Kaito Sena lacked any sense of wariness or appreciation for danger.

Growing increasingly exasperated, Elisabeth picked up the pace.

Eventually, she reached the small garden at the castle's rear. She opened the aged door leading outside and headed down the moss-covered steps. A slight wind grazed her body. Underneath the clear blue sky, the situation in the garden was unfolding in exactly the way she'd anticipated.

For a moment, a surprisingly serious thought passed through her mind—perhaps it would be best to turn around and leave posthaste.

Down in the garden, Kaito Sena was facing half of a ravaged corpse.

It was making tears stream from its eyes, as though silently begging for help. However, Elisabeth knew that help wasn't what it was after. It had overcome such base rationality long ago. Now it existed solely to resent people. It craved nothing more than to share its pain with the living.

'Twas torn up, sewed together, then while it yet lived…killed.

That kind of agony was enough to rob anyone of their humanity.

Now the corpse had been reduced to a monster.

However, Kaito didn't seem to notice the bottomless malice emanating from it. He regarded it without showing so much as an ounce of fear.

Then he said something truly idiotic.

"Don't worry, *I'm coming*."

…Perhaps it would be best if I were simply to leave him to his fate.

Elisabeth gave the thought some serious consideration. In the end, it was close, but she did eventually change her mind.

It was because Kaito's expression was simply far too kind. His sympathy and tolerance toward those suffering in pain were written all over his face. Without so much as hesitating, he approached the monster. It was an exceedingly foolish sight.

Yet at the same time, so too was it pitiable.

That was true of Kaito and the corpse alike.

"Idiots, the lot of them."

And so Elisabeth snapped her finger.

A mass of iron stakes burst up from the ground in front of Kaito. Without a noise, they pierced the body clean through.

Even though that was the second time Elisabeth had gotten in its way, the mercilessly skewered monster still didn't offer a single complaint as it vanished. Nothing remained of it. However, just repelling it over and over wasn't going to accomplish anything.

'Twill continue appearing, no doubt. What to do, what to do? …Oh?

All of a sudden, a certain item sprang to mind. An image of a clear glass ball flitted through her thoughts. She crossed her arms and began contemplating whether or not it would be useful. Before long, she reached her verdict.

As it turned out, it might just do the trick.

"Ah, such ingenuity! I've always had a faint inkling, but it would seem that I really am a genius. Oy, Kaito! Hmm?"

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes. Perhaps due to the shock from her attack, Kaito was lying flopped over on his back. His eyes were even closed. For whatever reason, he was trying to fall asleep. It was utterly unclear as to why.

At that rate, he was likely to misconstrue the stake attack as having been nothing more than a dream. Elisabeth had no objections there. It would save her having to explain what was going on. Instead, she bent her elbow and moved it into position.

"Taaaaaaaaaaake that!"

“Hurgh!”

With an absurdly carefree cry, she slammed her elbow straight into Kaito’s gut.

The shock from the blow immediately snapped his eyes open. He gingerly turned his gaze toward his belly. Elisabeth grinned at him with her arm still buried in his gut. After ten seconds or so of silence, Kaito finally spoke.

“You know, I figured you’d go for another leg attack, but it’s the arm this time, huh?”

“Hmhm, know now that I am a master of every combat technique known to— That’s not important right now, Kaito! First you oversleep, then you see fit to take a siesta on top of that?!”

“Huh, yeah, I guess I did.”

After having that fact pointed out, Kaito hurriedly rose to his feet. Elisabeth angrily arched her eyebrows, and the two of them exchanged some sharp repartee. Right as he was in the middle of reflecting on his own failings, though, his expression suddenly froze.

“…Wait, huh? I *was* asleep, right?”

Apparently, the whole situation was uncanny enough that even an idiot as simple as him could take notice. He glanced around, probably looking for the bloodstains. For a moment, his gaze lingered on the upturned patch of soil where the iron stakes had come out.

Knowing that whatever annoying questions he’d come up with would only add to her workload, Elisabeth immediately called out to him.

“Anyhow, if you have the time to be brazenly napping like that, then you must surely be bored to death. ’Tis fortunate for you, then, that I have the perfect job for those idle hands of yours. Come along now, and be chipper about it.”

“Okay, so I’ll admit that I was napping, but that doesn’t mean I’m— OW!”

“Oh, shut up! Just come!”

She grabbed him by the earlobe and forcibly dragged him off. As she did, she shot a glance back.

A graphic crimson pool was bubbling up on the ground.

The moment she saw it, Elisabeth coldly averted her gaze and began hurrying on forward.

It was almost as though she was trying to deny there had been anything there at all.

*

A long time ago, Elisabeth installed a magical device in one of the rooms down in the castle’s dimly lit underground hallways.

The device was designed to release people from nightmares. However, its actual effectiveness was suspect at best.

On top of that, testing it required at least two people, so as a result, Elisabeth had gone without ever trying it and had in fact mostly forgotten that it existed at all. However, it might well be just the thing they needed to resolve their current situation.

The only problem was how dangerous it was.

Kaito, of course, had strong feelings about being used as a guinea pig.

“Okay, that’s gonna be a reeeeal hard pass from me!”

“No, no, it’ll work! I haven’t the faintest shred of proof to support that notion, but I have this strange feeling that you’ll do just great!”

“That’s a little too important to leave up to a notion, don’t you think?! Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! If you’re gonna shove someone into something, at least make sure it works first!”

“You’re a man; have some guts! Worry not—if anything happens, I’ll be sure to retrieve your ashes!”

“Oh, so we’re just working under the *assumption* that I’m gonna die… Hey, wait, ahhhhhhhhhh!”

However, this had all been his fault to begin with, so his human rights were forfeit.

Elisabeth ignored his protests and pressed him against the device. With a *shoop*, he got sucked inside—or so he likely thought. Transporting his entire body would have been far more trouble than it was worth. Instead, the device was designed to split off the tip of his soul and borrow it for a little bit. When it did, his consciousness went along for the ride.

Back in reality, he had merely passed out. Elisabeth left his body on the floor and began observing what was going on in the device.

“Now, then. I’ve my suspicions about his nightmare’s true form. Let’s see if I’m right.”

Inside the glass, the flowers were glowing crimson, and their bloodred forms were endlessly shifting.

They became butterflies, then turned back into flowers, then became butterflies again. They gently scattered and flapped their wings. And the beautiful cycle continued. Suddenly, though, something changed. The dream world’s administrator, a black-and-white tapir, made its appearance.

Kaito unguardedly made his way toward it. When he tried to touch it, though, it casually gobbled his hand up.

“I mean, ’twas the right answer, but still, what kind of fool allows themselves to be eaten so easily?!”

Elisabeth could scarcely believe what she had just watched. Sure enough, Kaito was a dimwit, an idiot, and a simpleton.

Then the tapir burst.

Its skin split from the top down, then fell gently to the ground. The animal had been reduced to a horrible blob of muscle fibers. Chunks of meat began cascading off it, dripping with mucus as they delivered the data about the nightmare the tapir had eaten to the world itself.

Then the inside of the glass ball sharpened.

The field of flowers ceased its perpetual expansion and shed its crimson hue. All that remained was a vast array of silver needles.

The butterflies' wings followed suit, thinning out and becoming knives. The entire space was filled with objects designed to hurt people.

Elisabeth heaved a heavy sigh.

"As I thought… 'Tis like a veritable cage of pain."

Her silky black hair swayed as she turned around.

With a faint smile on her face, she called out:

"Ah, another expectation met. Sure enough, you heeded the call. This device piques your fancy, doesn't it?"

She was looking out the room's open door—

—toward the pool of crimson—

—that was expanding and spreading forth like a sea of blood.

*

Countless viscous balls of foam bubbled on the pool's blackened crimson surface.

This gave it the appearance of a putrid, burbling swamp. An especially large bubble formed on its surface, then popped, revealing a gaunt set of fingers. The rest of the lone arm rose up shortly thereafter, as did a single leg. Together, they dragged the torn-up body across the stone floor. The gruesome corpse looked up at Elisabeth. It offered her no other reply.

However, it did give its skin, flesh, and organs a meaningful shake. Elisabeth nodded. *Sure enough.*

The thing longed to be able to share its pain with the living, and it responded to the pain of others as well. Its sole desire was to merge its pain with someone else's, then force them to take on the entirety of this combined pain on their own.

That was the reason behind the corpse's fixation on Kaito Sena. At the moment, it was staring at the magical device so hard, it seemed liable to bore a hole in it.

"Grrr… Urrr…"

"Aye, 'tis a world constructed from pain. Interested, aren't you, in seeing which fool cooked it up? O pitiful wretch sheared apart by the Knight while still living and used as part of his beast."

And with that, Elisabeth casually revealed the corpse's true nature.

Originally, it had just been a normal old human. However, after it was captured alive by the Knight, the weakest of the fourteen ranked demons, it was torn apart and tied together with countless other such victims to form a massive patchwork beast. And the only reason it had suffered that horrible fate was because it had had the simple misfortune of living in a village near the Torture Princess's castle.

In a certain sense, it was Elisabeth's fault that this villager had come to harm. However, she didn't even know his name.

To her, he was just another innocent, nameless victim among countless others like him.

Even so, the corpse showed no sign of holding any special grudge against the Torture Princess. And that was to be expected. He didn't have the capacity to resent any one specific individual. The atrocity that innocent villager suffered was beyond the scope a person could even comprehend.

When someone had their body torn up and stitched together into a horrible beast, they generally lacked the presence of mind to attribute blame to a particular person.

Suspended in that state of confusion, the villager had suffered untold agonies. However, the Knight's death had freed him.

Or rather, it should have, but for some reason, he was still trapped in that state of pain.

'Tis doubtless because he couldn't accept… No, rather, he couldn't understand what had happened.

Normally, the villager should have died the moment his body was torn apart. However, the Knight's magic had forcibly kept him alive. Even when he suddenly returned to his proper state of "death," he couldn't understand that that was what had happened.

Instead of disappearing like normal, his soul stagnated. And because of that, he changed.

All he knew was pain.

The simple intensity of his agony had overwritten his very humanity.

That was what had reduced the villager to the monster it was now.

However, releasing it from that state would be easier said than done. Its consciousness had been worn away too badly for it to respond to reason, and on top of that, Elisabeth was the Torture Princess. Hurting people and causing them pain was the sum total of who she was.

She possessed neither the virtue of a saint nor the compassion of a hero. However…

"That said, continuing to have you haunt me seems a rather unpleasant proposition. Perhaps I'd best do something about you after all. Now, the boy who created this world is inside the glass ball. What do you say?"

The device glowed silver as Elisabeth pressed her palm against it. Inside, Kaito was engaging in an act that was either gallant, reckless, or simply stupid beyond belief and setting off across the brutal landscape without so much as faltering before the pain that was going to entail.

Blood trickled across the world of knives and needles.

Upon seeing that, the monster immediately reacted. It reached out with its one arm and leg. How simple it was, how pitiable, and how foolish. Elisabeth let out a callous laugh. However, those same traits would go on to save it.

Whether or not the monster would truly attain salvation, though, Elisabeth had no idea.

"Very well, then, I shall allow it. Come along now."

The monster accepted the Torture Princess's invitation and leaped. Its body, which was composed of nothing but its soul, vanished inside the magic device.

Elisabeth ran mana through her palm and shifted her consciousness and part of her soul along after it.

And with an illusory *shoop*—

—Elisabeth got sucked into the ball.

*

"You fear pain, aye, but you're far too accustomed to it. I daresay that that contradiction there is where your warped personality stems from."

As Elisabeth fell, she let out a quiet murmur.

Kaito must have heard her, as he frantically glanced around. When he did, though, he twisted his body a little too far and lost his balance. Like the fool he was, he'd forgotten that his foot was still impaled on the needles.

Elisabeth frowned. *Well, that's not good.* She flapped her dress like a bird's wings and whistled. Darkness and flower petals whirled through the air, eventually coalescing into a black ball and materializing with a *pop*.

The dream's master had made its appearance once more and was now far larger to boot. Elisabeth landed gracefully atop the massive tapir.

As she made it do a nose dive, she checked back in on Kaito's situation. He was right on the verge of completely toppling over.

"You're incorrigible, you know that? What, do you have some secret quota of blunders you feel compelled to meet or something?"

Exasperated, she reached out her arm and snatched Kaito's hand as it flailed through the air.

Then all in one go, she yanked him upward.

After plopping him down on the tapir's back, she sat down herself before he had a chance to come to his senses. Then she rested her arms on her knees and went back to observing the world.

Sure enough—they merged.

The corpse had come inside along with her, but it was currently nowhere to be seen. However, just because it wasn't visible didn't mean it wasn't there. Not only was it no more than a soul, but it was also little more than a mass of resentment and obsession with pain.

Given that the world they were in was composed of nothing but pain, it and the monster were practically identical. As a result, the monster had gotten absorbed by the world the moment it came inside, much like the tapir's meat rain had.

In a sense, the corpse and everything that was visible were now one and the same. It had been spread throughout the entire world.

Elisabeth nodded. Everything was going as she'd anticipated. When she did, an angry shout came from behind her.

"ELISABEEEEEEEEEETH!"

“Oh, hello there, Kaito.”

“Don’t you ‘oh, hello’ me, dammit! Do you have any idea what I just went through because of you?!”

When Kaito continued loudly shouting, Elisabeth lowered the hand she’d been lightly waving at him with.

Then she shrugged and gave him a nonchalant reply.

“Well, you say that, but even I hadn’t the faintest idea that your nightmares’ cause would take such a form. And besides, who exactly was it who refused to wait for me, striding across those needles on his own like an utter fool?”

“Well, it does sound bad when you put it that way… Wait, hold on a minute. *This* is the cause of my nightmares?”

“That it is. ’Tis a contradictory sight indeed.”

Elisabeth gazed down at the transformed field of flowers as she spoke. Still seated, Kaito scooted over until he was right next to her. What an easily distracted fellow he was. Elisabeth faced the world of knives and needles as she went on.

“To pinpoint the precise source of another’s nightmares, one must first dive deep into their memories. However, this is but an experimental device, and such a complex feat is beyond it. Instead, it displays a symbolic manifestation of the fear that drives its subject’s nightmares. What you see before you is its result. You fear pain, yet you’re accustomed to it and, at times, even accept it willingly. As I said, contradictory. ’Tis perverse, and that means a lot coming from me.”

“…Huh.”

“A sea of knives and needles, eh…? ’Tis a veritable cage of pain, impossible to ever escape from.”

Elisabeth narrowed her gaze. The scene bore a disturbing resemblance to the atrocity the Torture Princess once put her fiefdom through. Her subjects’ desperate pleas for the release of death had been music to her ears, and she’d savored them while sipping on the finest of wines.

Elisabeth went silent as her mind turned back to that night of madness. Kaito didn’t say anything, either.

For a time, it was silent atop the tapir’s back. Suddenly struck by the absurdity of it all, Elisabeth arched her back and stretched her arms all the way up. After bringing them back down, she exhaled.

“To be frank, though, it doesn’t matter to me in the slightest.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little *too* honest?”

“Ha. You think your trauma is special? What you fear, what you find unpleasant, what weight you bear…I’ve no intention of asking the details, nor would they hold my interest if I did.”

“That’s…fair, I guess.”

“That said, I do aim to obliterate this place now.”

“…Say what?”

Kaito’s reply was completely dumbfounded, a fact that Elisabeth found insulting.

How utterly insolent. In a more righteous world, he wouldn’t just be tortured for that; he’d be straight-up executed.

Setting aside that this was how the magic device worked, the situation as a whole made their sole option abundantly clear.

They had to break the cage.

They had to kill the monster.

For that was providence, as well as the merciful thing to do.

“When you put someone in the device, it reproduces the symbolic cause of their nightmares. However, that alone is but the first step. The way it ends the nightmares is by having a third party destroy the reproduction, thereby freeing the subject’s mind. A violent configuration, to be sure.”

“I feel like that doesn’t make any sense at all. Is this really gonna make the nightmares stop?”

“Oh, there’s certainly no guarantee of that! Most of the developers of large-scale magic devices such as this end up going mad!”

“I’m starting to sense a trend with these unfounded statements you keep making.”

“That said, ridiculous as the ideas behind it may be, ’twas well worth testing it out. We’ve not had any battles as of late, and I could feel my body growing duller by the day… Plus, I just went through a rather unpleasant experience.”

Elisabeth let out a biting murmur and cracked her knuckles.

Now that she thought about it, this had been quite a day. Starting with Kaito’s failure to wake up on time, one unpleasant event had occurred after another. To be quite frank, Elisabeth was a little fed up with it.

It was high time she put an end to it all.

“Bakuuuu,” the tapir cried. It could clearly sense her violent intentions. However, Elisabeth ignored it. To the contrary, in fact, she treated its cry as a signal to let the destruction commence.

She reached out into empty space, and a vortex of darkness and crimson flower petals formed around her pale hand.

Then she drew a long sword from within.

“Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal!”

The unsettling epitaph inscribed on the sword’s elegant blade flashed. Anyone who saw it would have the meaning of its phrase driven straight into their brain. Elisabeth swung the sword down like she was signaling an execution to take place.

“Witches’ Dance!”

Its blade sliced through the empty air.

As it did, the silver landscape began to change. The air shimmered with heat, and the ground, which had taken the wave of her magic head on, transformed into a vast sheet of burning metal. If anyone had been standing on it, the heat would have forced them to hop around like a madman.

However, visible beings weren't the only ones who could feel its effects. Even now, there was a lone monster writhing atop the scorching plane.

Elisabeth narrowed her crimson eyes.

It hurts, doesn't it? Good! Savor the taste of my torture and, with it, remember.

The pain of being burned was different from the pain of being torn apart. Once the monster experienced that new kind of pain, doubt would surely rise up in its mind. He was already dead. Why, then, should he have to experience yet another type of pain? And when that happened, that intense confusion should temporarily revive the monster's humanity.

The metal plane's temperature rose mercilessly, growing higher and higher by the moment. Its silver flowers drooped and sagged as they melted. The intense heat was permeating every inch of this bounded world. And Kaito and Elisabeth were no exception.

The tapir only barely managed to ascend in time. It flailed its stubby arms and legs about to protest the heat.

Kaito had to cling tight to its round back to avoid being thrown off. He let out a panicked shout.

"H-hey, Elisabeth! At this rate, you're gonna end up burning us to death, too!"

"Hmm. That is a problem, isn't it? To be quite frank, I never actually considered that possibility."

"Why wasn't that the *first* thing you thought of?!"

Kaito's cry echoed with concern and indignation, but Elisabeth didn't pay it the slightest heed.

She was listening to a different howl, one that was coming from the world itself.

"No, no, no no no nononononono! It's hot, it hurts, help, someone save me!"

The corpse's sanity had been locked in a stupor by its simple agony, but the new pain had revitalized it and brought it back to the forefront. And now that the corpse had its senses back, there was something Elisabeth needed to do.

She parted her scarlet lips and, without a moment's hesitation, made her bold declaration.

"Now, 'tis time to seal the deal."

It was time for her to end all the nightmares.

Destroying and killing were the sole talents the Torture Princess had to her name. As such, Elisabeth's role to was deliver a second violent death to the newly conscious soul. She swung her sword down without so much as a shred of mercy.

Darkness and crimson flower petals surged forth, emitting a shock wave that got absorbed by the gaps between the ashen clouds.

The sky creaked. Then the sound of glass shattering filled the air.

That sound was the death knell of the world and monster alike. The world was broken, and death was the only fate that awaited any who were spread throughout it.

The innocent villager had now met his second death. Elisabeth was certain of it.

Shards of the sky cascaded down like shooting stars.

Thousands of scraps of light rained down from overhead.

And immediately thereafter, Elisabeth and Kaito got violently launched outside.

*

“Taaaaaaaaaaaake that!”

“Hurgh!”

That marked the third attack Kaito’s chest had suffered that day.

It was getting to the point where Elisabeth felt she should start collecting a fee for services rendered. Kaito, on the other hand, seemed displeased with the wake-up calls. How utterly insolent. This time, though, Elisabeth decided to overlook his slight.

Instead, she took a moment to seriously examine the broken ball. The damage was fairly severe. It had served its purpose just the way she’d hoped it would, but she had a bone to pick with its shabby construction.

“What a flimsy piece of junk that turned out to be. For how dangerous a device it was, I’d have expected it to survive at least a single use.”

“I bet it would have if you didn’t use it like a lunatic.”

Kaito gave her an exasperated reply. He wasn’t just being insolent; now he was being downright rude. However, Elisabeth chose to overlook his irreverence once more, and the two of them shared a trivial little exchange. All the while, Elisabeth continued running her fingers over the device.

The world of pain was broken. The monster was dead. However, it was unclear whether or not the device would ever be fit for use again.

Well, I’m sure I’ll fix it somehow or other, Elisabeth ultimately decided. She withdrew her hand and turned to Kaito.

“And on another note, I take it your odd drowsiness is gone?”

“Huh? Oh, actually, now that you mention it, yeah… I guess today’s just been one weird experience after another.”

His answer was far vaguer than Elisabeth would have liked. She frowned.

After being freed from the Knight’s beast, the villager’s soul had been left without a proper form. The only reason it had been able to materialize the way it had was because it had found such a choice piece of prey in Kaito. The sensation he felt once it started hunting him hadn’t been drowsiness; it had been the sheer pressure of the monster’s desire to drag him to his death.

Elisabeth took another look around Kaito. The dark shadow was gone.

It would appear that the monster really was dead. Or to be more precise, it was now properly aware that it was dead.

As such, it had vanished off to wherever dead people normally went.

If such a place even exists, mind you.

The existence of the higher entities God and Diablo had been conclusively determined, but nobody had been able to prove where people’s souls went when they died. That was why Elisabeth hadn’t known if her choice would end up bringing salvation to the monster.

The only things she had done were grant a dead man more pain and vanquish him as he screamed.

’Twould be arrogant to describe such an act as “sending it to its rest.”

The wicked Torture Princess had ended its existence. That was all.

A dead man had vanished. Nothing more, nothing less.

Elisabeth didn't regret her decision, nor was she ashamed of it. She gave a proud, haughty nod.

"If so, then I daresay you have me to thank. If you wish to drop to your knees and express your reverent gratitude, I certainly shan't stop you."

"Why? Just why?"

Kaito shot her a resentful look. He truly was foolish, this foolish servant of hers. However, it was precisely that foolishness that made it such a bother to explain things to him when he directed baseless complaints her way. Elisabeth elected just to scoff.

Then she suddenly remembered how famished she was.

Meals were some of the highlights of her days. In fact, they were the only highlights.

She crossed her arms. Then instead of complaining, she went on.

"Now then, Kaito, 'tis almost dinnertime. Should my meal be late, I assume you've no objections to finding yourself atop the Ducking Stool."

"Actually, I think I have an objection or two."

Even after she threatened him like that, he was still probably going to present her with something utterly inedible.

Even though she knew that, Elisabeth looked forward to her dinner nonetheless.

*

Everything past here is nothing more than a digression.

You could ignore it all, and not be the slightest bit worse off for it.

The story started a good while back.

Back when Elisabeth first installed the magic device designed to release people from nightmares.

Why would she do such a thing?

Every day, she would spend countless hours in idle slumber. She was the type that preferred to sleep au naturel. Never once had she tossed and turned due to nightmares, never once had she gotten insufficient sleep, and never once had her rest interfered with her daytime activities.

However, the Torture Princess dreamed.

And it was rather unpleasant, having a nightmare and being unable to wake up despite knowing it was a dream.

In a world that she was unable to wake from of her own volition, she was bombarded with constant shouts.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth, cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, Elisabeth!

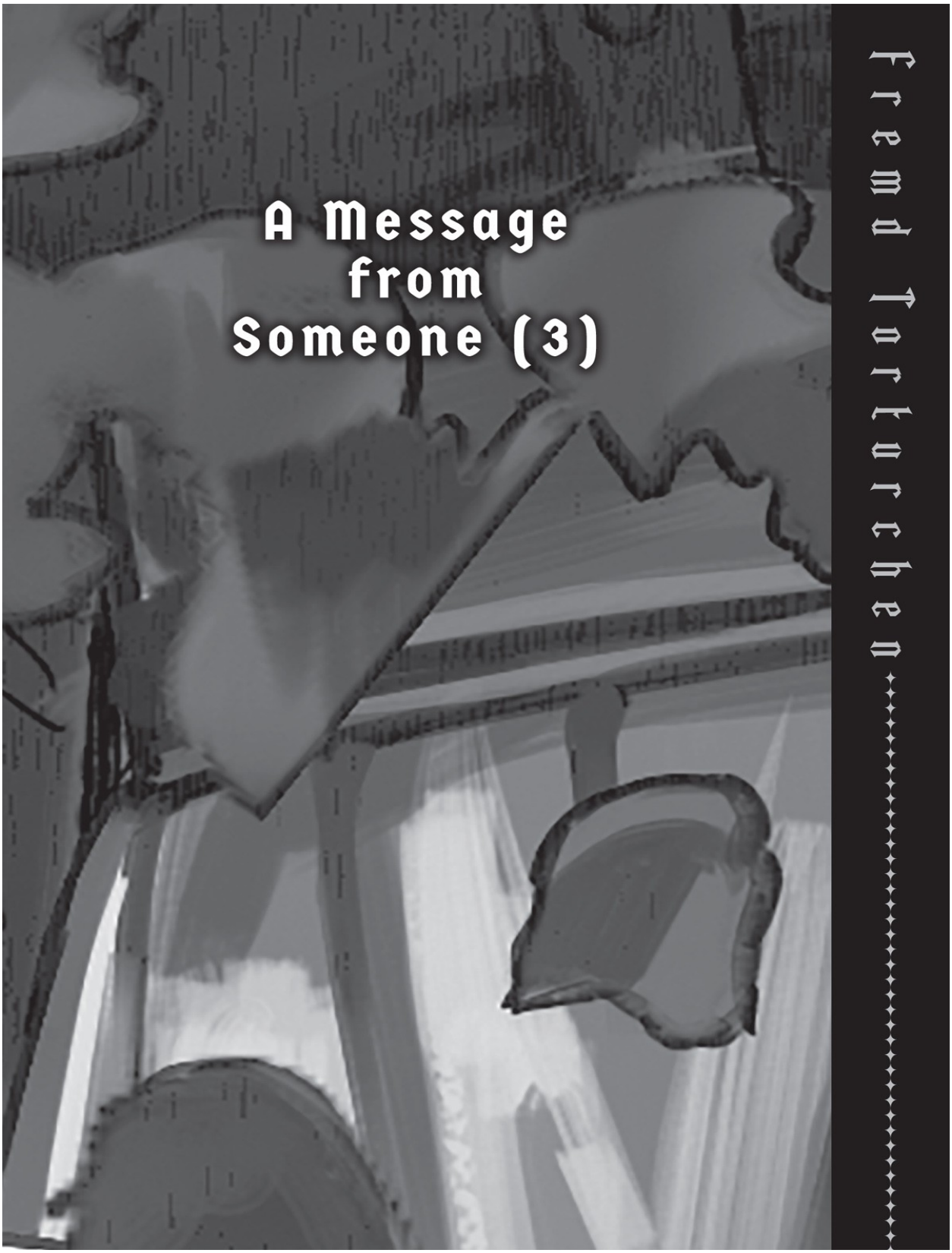
Countless voices echoed out with scorn and maledictions.

The Torture Princess was being burned in the fires of Hell in front of all the masses.

Night in and night out, her torment continued without cease.

However, Elisabeth Le Fanu had never once tossed and turned.

And she had never once feared going to sleep.



Fremd Torturchen

A Message from Someone (3)

“I never once loved you people.”

I believe I said something to that effect in my last message. Truth be told, though, that was a lie. Back then, I *did* love you.

Or at least, I stubbornly convinced myself that I did.

No, no, even that’s fairly far from the truth. I really do need to stop talking in vague half statements. But just to begin with, defining *love* isn’t the easiest thing to do.

For example, can you truly say that you love the fragile world you live in?

Can you really describe your relationship with the thing you interact with and bear responsibilities toward each day with a word as pure and straightforward as *love*? I strongly doubt it. And even if you can, it’s nothing more than the product of self-delusion. In reality, the way you feel about it is complicated, with all sorts of different emotions intermingling and coexisting.

I once hated a world such as yours, and so, too, did I love it.

The real me never once possessed the unconditional love or boundless mercy that the stories attribute to me. I was never perfectly good, and I was never perfectly evil.

However, my saying this might be nothing more than an act of outrageous modesty.

Back then, I was driven by all sorts of ideas, convictions, and self-righteousness and filled with all sorts of sorrow, grief, and sadness, and yet even so, I clung desperately to my love and my hope. Thinking back on it now, the inside of my brain must have been like an incandescent pit of hellfire.

In other words, I had the makings of a preeminent deviant—

—as well as the confidence and blind faith befitting a savior, all in spades.

If I hadn’t, I never would have been able to commit a sin that profane. Or at the very least, I would have refused to bear the burden of my failure. Yet I did in fact both commit a sin and bear the burden.

Because of that, I became the most contradictory entity this world has ever seen.

I am more sinful than any, holier than any, lowlier than any, and more exalted than any.

I am a sinner without peer. And I am an innocent victim.

As for my current status, though—

—I’m sorry to say that I’ve gone well and truly mad.

✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 4 ✦✦✦✦

The two of them lived in an abandoned underground cemetery.

The town above it had been destroyed and left deserted; the demon army had marched through it before the Torture Princess stopped them.

They didn't tell me themselves—

—but I suspect they had many bases just like that one. Their headquarters was stationed somewhere else; I'm almost certain of that much.

However, neither of them seemed to plan on taking me there.

They told me that their current mission was to go around and prevent the string of incidents where people of mixed race were being used as live sacrifices.

Back at the inn, the people they massacred were part of a group that was responsible for selling folks like us in large numbers. If that had been all, then the fact that they were dead would have been downright pleasant.

In fact, killing them would have been the kind of thing a hero would do. But I saw what my saviors did with my own two eyes. I couldn't bring myself to accept their words at face value.

That wasn't the whole story. I was sure of it.

They had to be plotting something. It was like there was something lurking just beneath their skin.

Something rotten.

Other than that, though, the girl, Alice, seemed like a normal, happy-go-lucky child.

"Good morning, Mr. White Rabbit! Did you sleep well? You're one of Father's comrades, so because I'm the one who cut off your arm, it's my job to look after you. Look, here's your breakfast. Remember, good little boys and girls shouldn't be picky eaters! Hmm? You're having trouble eating? Oh, I'm sorry. Here, say aaah."

And true to her word, she looked after me well. The facility's walls were a drab gray, and it had clearly been erected in a hurry, but when Alice sprinted through it in her blue dress, she filled the hallways with color. She was surrounded by people of mixed race and doted on by all of them.

She was naive at times, a little odd, and overly fond of pranks and mischief.

Yet even so, few of them ever scolded her.

The one exception was her father.

"Alice, you want to become a proper lady, don't you? If so, you need to stop trying to raise fish in the experiment vats. Do you understand? Think of how surprised the poor cleaner was when they saw your fish in a vat that was supposed to be empty."

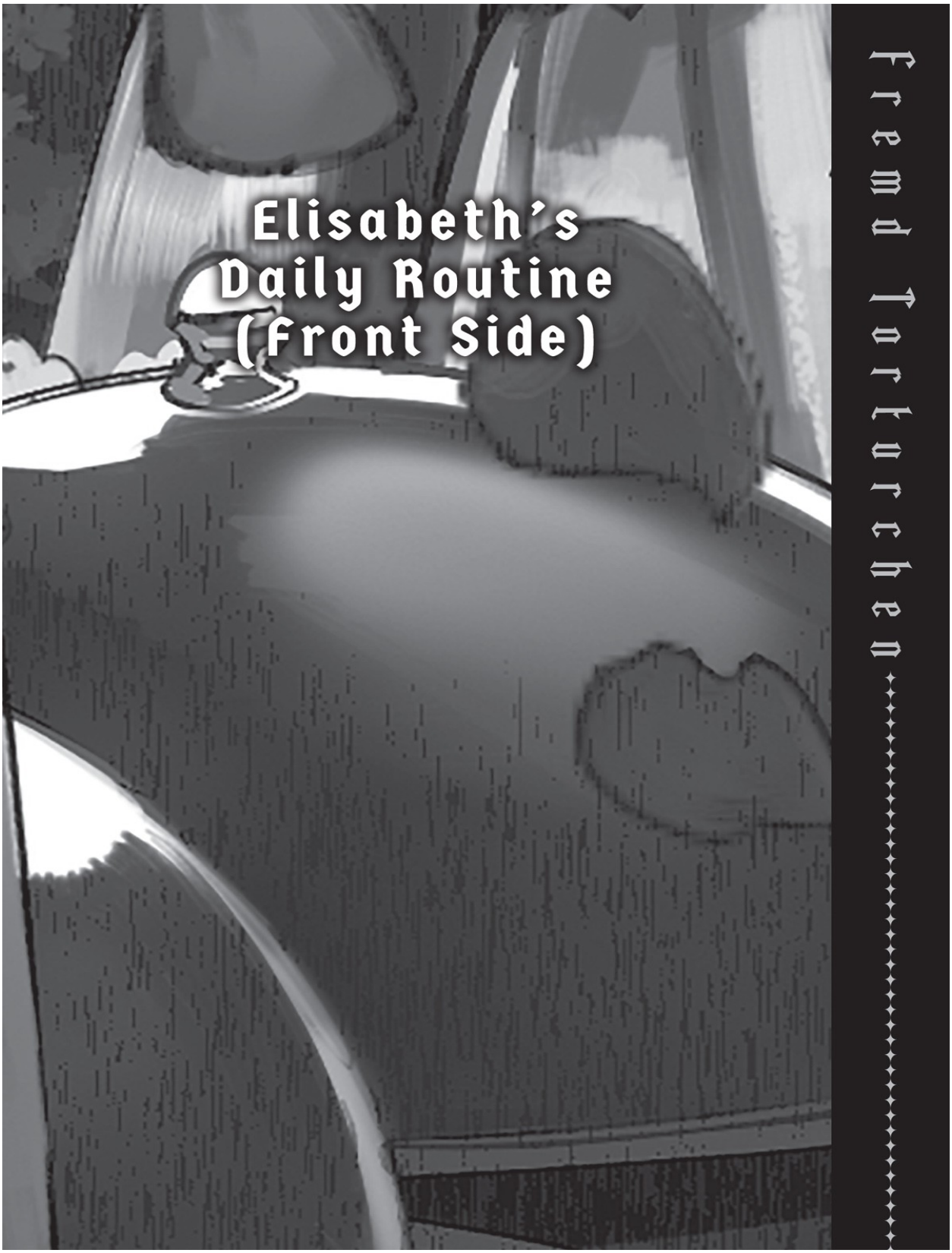
"I-I'm sorry, Father. But see, one of the fish that Marwell got in today was delightfully green and sparkly! Why, I couldn't just let them chop it up! That would be ever so sad! That's why I had to save it in secret."

"If you really feel that strongly about it, then you need to start by getting permission from the cook. After that, you must go around and find proper equipment to raise it with. Fish can't survive in a random vessel if all you do is fill it with water and toss them in. If you're going to do something, you have to make sure you do it right. And you have to make sure to feed it when it needs food as well. That part's important, so make sure you don't forget."

His eyes were downright lifeless, but he did make for a proper teacher.

That said, when I found out that the fish Alice had been trying to keep was well over three feet long, I felt that he should have maybe gotten at least a little angry at her.

In any case, though, the two of them got along wonderfully.


Elisabeth's
Daily Routine
(Front Side)

Elisabeth’s Daily Routine (Front Side)

“Mmm… Ahhh.”

Elisabeth let out an alluring sigh as she woke. Her consciousness burst up from the fire and curses that made up her nightmare, and her long lashes fluttered as she opened her eyes.

Then she gracefully rose.

Her blanket slid from her bare shoulders, and her smooth skin gleamed like a pearl in the morning light. Elisabeth preferred to sleep au naturel, and as a result, her silken black hair flowed down her shapely cleavage like water.

The whole scene had a taboo beauty to it, as well a peaceful sort of calm.

However, Elisabeth soon broke that tranquility with a small scoff.

“…Hmph.”

Her bedroom was modest, and in it, she was alone. The person who was normally by her side when she woke was nowhere to be seen.

There was only one other person who was allowed to enter her bedroom in the morning, and it was her automaton maid, Hina. Even since she was first activated, Hina had not only been serving as a valuable combat asset, but she had also been carrying out her maid duties to perfection.

Every morning without fail, Hina would bring her a greeting and a cup of tea with a smile on her face. *“Good morning, my dearest Lady Elisabeth! The weather is lovely today, as well befits your beauty and my beloved Master Kaito’s handsomeness!”* Kaito had turned down Hina’s offer to do the same for him, so she had been devoting all her effort into making Elisabeth’s morning refreshment the best it could be. Because Hina carefully changed the tea’s composition based on the ambient temperature and humidity, it always hit the spot just right. Today, though, Hina was absent from her post. However, it wasn’t because she was late or had overslept.

It was simply because Elisabeth had woken up too early.

Outside, it was still dark. Dawn had yet to break.

At the moment, Hina was probably still in the middle of partaking in her little hobby before she got to work preparing breakfast (her *“brief little indulgence,”* she called it). Each morning, she would press herself against the door to Kaito’s room and listen closely to the sound of his breathing. What she found enjoyable about that was wholly unclear to Elisabeth.

However, at least it was harmless. Elisabeth decided to leave her to her own devices.

The larger problem lay elsewhere.

Outside her window, there was something on the other side of the shutters.

Its unpleasant presence was what woke Elisabeth up. She didn't sense any animosity from it.

However, the fact remained that it had a strangely foul smell to it.

"What, more of this nonsense? Who is it this time who approaches the Torture Princess's castle so fearlessly?"

Elisabeth was annoyed, and for good reason.

Ever since she subjugated Vlad Le Fanu, she had gotten wrapped up in one bizarre incident after another.

For example, there was the battle against the Grand Governor the other day. Before the fight even began, she and the others got wrapped up in a mess involving animal ears. At the end of the day, what even *were* animal ears? The more she thought about it, the less sense it made.

Now, though, things had finally started settling down around the castle. Or at least, she thought they had.

"My dream wasn't a pleasant one by any stretch of the imagination, but even so, interfering with my sleep is a heinous crime indeed."

Elisabeth strode over to her window. Whoever it was on the other side, they had been ready. She grabbed the shutters and slammed them open.

Outside, a dark bat-like figure was flapping its wings. The moment she saw it, Elisabeth snapped her fingers.

"Silk Pin."

Crimson flower petals whirled up, accompanied by a darkness blacker than night. An almost laughably soft *thump* sounded out.

Her pin pierced the strange creature clean through and pressed it against the floor like a specimen on display. It was a familiar that appeared to be a cross between a bat and a piglet. Something fell from its talons onto the floor.

Elisabeth looked at it. Then she frowned.

It looked like a crimson flower. And yet it wasn't.

It was a human wrist.

After being lopped off from halfway down the elbow, the arm had undergone a grotesque treatment. All the bones had been removed around the cross section, and the flesh had been carefully carved into thin little sheets. From there, they'd been peeled outward into a beautiful crimson rose.

In the bone's place, something black and boorish-looking had been jammed inside.

"All that effort spent, just for *that*? They could have easily delivered its contents on their own."

Elisabeth sighed and went to retrieve the wrist. The object inside the hole was a wooden cylinder. The way it had been plunged into the soft meaty pouch called to mind the image of a man and a woman having intercourse.

A wet, squishy noise sounded as Elisabeth wrenched the cylinder free. Strands of viscous mucilage dripped off it.

Suddenly, she raised an eyebrow. The cylinder's specifics had defied all her expectations.

It was a statue of the Saint, tears of blood and all.

"What is this, blasphemy? Sacrilege? A cheap act of rebellion? Any and all of the above, I dare imagine, but still, isn't it a tad blatant? A little subtlety would go a long way… Although, that said, I suppose this whole little scheme was annoying from the get-go."

Exasperated, Elisabeth took another look at the Saint statue.

Its slender form was soiled from top to bottom with blood and fat, and its neck had a cut on it from being beheaded. They must have removed the head, then sealed it back on with wax. Elisabeth wasted no time in slicing the head back off. Inside, she found a rolled-up piece of parchment. She unfurled it and scanned it over.

"…I see. I've seen this type before, but I do wish they'd have at least waited for daybreak."

Elisabeth gave her bare shoulders a shrug. Then she snapped her fingers, and darkness and flower petals enveloped her naked body.

A moment later, the Torture Princess was clad in her black bondage dress.

It was loud, bold, and audacious, just the way Elisabeth liked it. However, that wasn't to say she had designed the outfit intentionally. It took its form all on its own based on the aggressiveness of Elisabeth's mana and the brand of magic she used. It was a design that most people would be ashamed to be caught dead in.

However, Elisabeth was quite fond of it.

After all, this sort of shameless, provocative outfit suited the Torture Princess to a T. Her dress's hem fluttered as she spoke.

"Well, nothing for it. Bothersome as it may be, 'tis best to clean up messes quick. If the matter remains unsettled come morning, that dunce Kaito will no doubt make quite a fuss, and… Wait, hmm? Why should I, the master, have to look out for my servant's feelings?"

Elisabeth frowned. How odd. However, she quickly pulled herself together and tossed the wrist and cylinder over her shoulder. A pair of noises rang out, one a hard *clunk*, and the other a soft *splurch*.

The two items had hit the wall, and they both fell to the floor. Elisabeth didn't spare them so much as a glance. As she set off, the scarlet inside of her dress flared out behind her.

Her heels clicked as she strode through the castle and made her way to the exit. The world outside was clad in the black of night.

Then without a single attendant in tow—

—the Torture Princess strode out into the moonlight.

*

She probably seemed oddly defenseless like that.

However, that was nothing compared with the fact that the Torture Princess's castle wasn't even closed off to visitors.

The bare rock it was surrounded by gave it a boorish sort of appearance, and one might even describe the place as fortresslike. However, its actual defenses were surprisingly lacking.

It had no barrier erected around it, nor did it house any summoned beasts or gatekeepers. It did have some traps and walking suits of armor to its name, but even those turned off during the day and became nothing more than ornamentation. And the castle's existence wasn't kept a secret in the slightest.

As a result, countless people spoke of it in hushed tones.

"The Torture Princess lives in that castle of rock and stone," they said.

For a rumor, it had a decidedly fantastical ring to it.

All that was extremely intentional. In truth, Elisabeth left herself vulnerable to attack on purpose. By using herself as bait for the demons, she was hoping to hasten their showdowns. However, the rod she cast pulled up no shortage of small fry as well.

This was certainly not the first unwanted dimwit who'd come knocking on her door.

"It's a wondrous honor to be graced with your radiant presence, O beautiful Torture Princess. O ravishing Elisabeth Le Fanu!"

A voice overcome with emotion echoed out through the dark forest.

A group of birds took off at the sudden noise, cawing loudly as they flew away.

The speaker quivered passionately and spread his arms wide. The high-quality black cloak he was wearing quivered along with him.

There was a bowler hat perched atop his head, and his face was hidden behind a gaudy mask. It was covered in silver, jewels, and goose feathers, no doubt to capture the attention of any who looked at it and get them to forget the rest of his appearance. However…

"Oh, how long I've dreamed of this day… Why, you're even more beautiful than I imagined! How splendiferous!"

"Ah. Is that so? Goodness me."

…his voice was obnoxiously shrill. He could dress himself up however much he liked, but it meant nothing when he had such a distinctive characteristic right there in the open.

Elisabeth looked at the man with lifeless eyes. She hadn't expected the person waiting for her to be quite such an idiot.

The two of them were standing in the forest down beneath the desolate hill her castle stood on. It was the exact spot that had been written on the parchment.

Elisabeth squeezed the bridge of her nose. Her head hurt.

"You wake a person at this ungodly hour, then have the nerve to say I'm 'gracing you with my presence'? If every word that comes out of your mouth

is going to be this insipid, I've half a mind to slice you in two where you stand."

The man stiffened up. Apparently, he'd hoped for them to get off on a better foot.

A few seconds later, he feigned having to cough, then let out a questionable laugh and tried once more.

"Hyoh-heh, I suppose that's the Torture Princess for you. That pride, that arrogance…how fitting for the one who will guide us and share our path!"

"What? No, a rebuttal such as that hardly scratches the surface of the Torture Princess's arrogance. Good heavens, how tepid did you think I was going to be? What are you, some wet-behind-the-ears noble? If the Church found out you were saying such things, they wouldn't just stop at seizing your assets, you know. They'd subject you to a full-on inquisition. And looking at you, that's not an experience you'd much relish…"

Elisabeth put a quick damper on the man's excitement. He shook violently. However, he rallied once more.

He then let out another laugh. Elisabeth almost made a quip about the limited range of his responses, but she decided it wouldn't be worth the trouble.

Instead, she shifted her gaze behind him. Waiting in the trees was a black-lacquered carriage. Its horses' glossy coats were the same hue, and his lamp-carrying driver was clad all in black as well. At a glance, it was impossible to tell what family the man belonged to. On further inspection, however, the relief of the carriage's coat of arms was still identifiable even though it had been painted over.

Not buying a new carriage when one was trying to travel incognito was an amateurish mistake. Everything about the man seemed downright farcical.

His is a common type…too common, I daresay. And a headache each time they pop up.

As Elisabeth muttered internally, the man continued his outlandish hyoh-ing and heh-ing.

He seemed to have little intention of ever getting to the point. Elisabeth spoke in a tired tone in hopes of getting the ball rolling.

"So can I leave now?"

"Of course not!"

"Then I shall ask you thus—are you a demon worshipper? An organization that stands against the Church? Or perhaps the leader of a religion all your own?"

"O-oh my, to think you'd hit the nail on the head with such accuracy…"

"What? Given the way you delivered your message, it'd have been odder for me not to have figured it out. No matter, though."

Elisabeth let out a long sigh. At this point, there was little meaning in getting fed up.

This wasn’t the first time she’d been called for in this way.

The Torture Princess was a pawn of the Church, tasked with killing the fourteen demons and slated for execution. Yet even so, there were no small number of heretics and blasphemers who still saw her as someone to be idolized. To them, the way she’d killed her people in gross defiance of God and her battles with the knights were feats to be lauded, and the atrocities she’d committed at the Plain of Skewers were considered particularly praiseworthy. Now, though, that ideal woman had been reduced to a lapdog in service to God and the Church. Some of them refused to accept that fact, and as such, they came calling on her from time to time.

The man before her was probably no different. He bowed as he began speaking once more.

“It would seem I don’t need to introduce myself, I see… Very well! Then let’s talk, you and I. As you surmised, we stand against the coercive brainwashing the Church conducts on the masses, and we hold demons in the highest regard in their stead.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment. You’re as black a lot as they come; that much is clear enough from your garb. You people do love that color, don’t you?”

“The way they shout for us to believe in God and the Saint, the way they insist their doctrine is the one true creed…it’s unnatural, isn’t it? And their legends are all full of holes. The more research we do, the more we find to question in their dogma. But, ah, you’re the Torture Princess. Surely, I don’t need to tell *you* about how twisted the Church is.”

“True enough. The specifics of the Church’s legends are too vague to warrant the blind faith they ask for, and the accounts of the Saint vary dramatically from book to book. Between that, some of their more suspect inquisitors, and the very existence of saints, the Church has no shortage of notable perversions. So?”

“So it’s our noble duty to rectify the failings that come from their unjust control of the world! And to do that, we have to offer our faith and devotion to demons, the beings who stand against not just the Church, but against God himself!”

“Well now, that doesn’t make a lick of sense. God proved Himself unworthy, so you turned immediately to Diablo and its brood? You’re simply exchanging one extreme for another. But no matter, that. Let me then ask the question that bears asking. That is the reason I answered your insipid summons and came all the way here, after all.”

Elisabeth let out yet another sigh. She closed her eyes, then opened them.

When she did, they gleamed crimson, and she spoke in the stern tone of a seasoned interrogator.

“That meat was fresh. *Were they yet living* when you sliced it off?”

“Ah, so you enjoyed our little present!”

Elisabeth's tone was now as cold as ice, but the man didn't seem to notice the change.

His mask gleamed ominously as he enthusiastically went on.

"Our group holds rituals, which involve human sacrifices, to deepen our bonds and to further blasphemy against God. We take the offering *alive* and make *beautiful artwork* out of them. Just like you—*just like the Torture Princess*!"

The corner of Elisabeth's mouth twitched upward. The man still didn't notice. She shook her head from side to side.

Then her demeanor did a complete about-face, and she curled her lips into a sweet smile.

"I see. So you claim to be imitating me, of all things… Very well, then. You lot possess skill enough to craft a familiar, but you lack the strength to summon an authentic demon. Yet though you have no such entity at hand, you offer up pain to them nonetheless. But even that failed to distinguish yourselves among other such groups, so despite my being shackled by the Church as I am, you wish to install me as your figurehead. Is that about the gist of it?"

"Goodness, it's like you know us already."

"'Tis the desire of most who come seeking an audience with me and asking for my cooperation—but very well. First, I must confirm something. Bring me to this meeting place of yours, and I shall see for myself if you've prepared a throne befitting the Torture Princess."

"Y-you're serious? You'll become our sponsor—our figurehead?"

"Enough blathering. 'Tis rude to make a lady repeat herself."

Elisabeth gently raised her fair hand, and the man extended his in kind. His fingers were trembling—perhaps in fear, and perhaps in delight. Ignoring how ridiculous he looked, Elisabeth elegantly took his hand in hers.

Then out of the blue, she yanked him toward her, bringing her lips to his ear and letting out a sultry whisper.

"If I deem you worthy, then I shall take your dull destinies and forever alter them."

Her words were as sweet as honey and as piercing as venom.

The man jolted. Then, fearing she might change her mind, he hurried over to the carriage with her hand still in his. The driver dutifully opened the door. Elisabeth boarded with a gallant leap, then majestically plopped down on the leather seat within. The man excitedly sat down beside her. Without sparing him a glance, Elisabeth crossed her legs. All the while, the catlike smile on her face never faded.

With a crack of the whip, the horses set off, and the carriage began moving. The moment it did, though, its frame rocked in a peculiar manner. The driver tilted his head to the side a little. However, the irregularity didn't persist, so it must have just hit a rock or something. The carriage continued on.

The dawn was yet unbroken.

Under the cover of night, Elisabeth and the others quickly made their way through the forest.

*

The sound of water dripping echoed out.

Cramped earthen walls were faintly visible in the small area illuminated around them.

The driver at the front of their group was holding a lantern, and each time it shook, the ground faintly shone. It was wet with pooled water, and the flame's light reflecting off the water's surface made it look like the land was burning. Elisabeth and the others trampled that golden flame underfoot as they advanced down the corridor.

After passing through the village that had been destroyed by the Knight, the group had reached a dilapidated house, then passed through it and gone underground.

The building, as Elisabeth discovered, had originally been built as a noble's suburban villa. Its owner was a devout member of the Church, and the villa's main building was connected to an attached chapel. And hidden beneath that chapel's altar was a staircase leading underground.

It appeared to be set up that way so people could move between the main building and the annex in case some sort of emergency happened. However, it was unclear how devout someone could really claim to be if they went out of their way to build an altar with a secret passageway beneath.

Elisabeth had frowned, and the man, sensing her doubts, had answered them.

"The manor's owner, fool that he was, was a devout believer like his father and grandfather before him. However, his son rebelled against their pious lifestyle and gave himself to a life of debauchery. When the debts he'd incurred began coming due, he scraped together the last of his money to build this as an escape route to flee from his debtors. Not that it did him much good, mind you; they caught up with him in no time. Later, when the debtors started selling off his assets, I discovered the manor's secret and ended up purchasing it. I left the building mostly as is, but I completely renovated the hidden chamber. I think you'll like what I've done with it."

After he explained the situation, they set off down the dark underground tunnel.

The passageway seemed straight enough, but even so, there was no end in sight. Elisabeth sighed for the umpteenth time.

"We've still yet to reach it? This hidden chamber or whatnot of yours."

"I really do apologize for the poor walking conditions. We're almost there, so I hope you'll put up with it for just a bit longer."

Sure enough, the man soon stopped. The driver raised his lantern up high, illuminating the oddly fleshy nude etching of the Saint in the door beside them. The original composition was a well-known religious painting, but it had been exaggerated in a way that was somehow both sexual and comedic. The man cleared his throat, concerned that Elisabeth might find it offensive. It would seem that he realized that it was in poor taste. However, Elisabeth didn't much care one way or the other. She offered no reaction.

Clearly relieved, the man knocked on the door. A muffled voice came from the other side.

"Who do we extol?"

"Those who sup on the pain of man."

"And what do we seek?"

"An abyss of greed and avarice."

It was a needlessly theatrical exchange, and a pointless one to boot. If the paladins found out about them, they wouldn't have time to ask for a passcode before the paladins just smashed the door in. Elisabeth gently squeezed the bridge of her nose.

The door opened from within, and the driver bowed and stepped back. Apparently, he wasn't coming with them.

Elisabeth and the man strode forward. It had been dead silent in the tunnel, but inside, they were greeted by a loud clamor. There were many voices that Elisabeth could make out, but one of them in particular was especially disquieting.

Someone was letting out a low moan.

When she heard it—

—the Torture Princess slowly looked up.

*

The room within was surprisingly spacious. When the man said he'd remodeled it, he clearly hadn't been lying.

There was a fancy chandelier hanging from its ceiling and an ominously patterned carpet had been placed atop its tiled floor. A square section in the middle of the carpet had been cut out, and a stone pedestal sat atop the bare floor that was displayed. There was no other furniture to speak of. For the room's purposes, that pedestal alone was sufficient.

A gathering of people wearing the same black clothes and gaudy masks as the man sat around the pedestal. It resembled a sort of bizarre masquerade ball. However, the mood in the room was oddly manic.

The group looked up in unison. It reminded Elisabeth of a flock of crows —a group that gathered around carrion and feasted on their rotting carcasses. With no way to tell how she envisioned them, though, the group clad in black let out cries of joy and delight.

"Can it be? The Torture Princess herself, in our midst?! At long last, our prayers are answered!"

“Ah, such beauty! Why, her looks put even the rumors to shame!”

“…I can’t believe that coward actually followed through. I need to go introduce myself at once.”

The whispers that filled the air were filled with childishly frank admiration. Elisabeth paid them no heed, nor did she return any of their passionate, almost loving gazes.

No, her crimson eyes were fixed solely on the pedestal.

A young girl was crucified atop it.

She had yet to reach maturity, like a sapling that had just begun to sprout. Perhaps they had bought her, or perhaps they’d taken her from some small rural village after sweet-talking her parents. Either way, her abdomen looked like it had been pecked apart by crows. Her flesh was dark crimson, raw, and filthy.

To wit, her stomach had been sliced open.

Inside the cut, her innards had been ever so carefully mixed up, and every one of her organs was missing little bits and pieces from it.

Elisabeth shifted her gaze over to the figures clad in black. Each of them was holding a set of cutlery in their hands.

The forks and knives in question were all wet with blood, and the silver plates in front of them were adorned with fresh chunks of meat. Livers and eyeballs reflected back the room’s light. And the dinner sets were each replete with a cup full of freshly drawn blood.

Even as she was being eaten, the girl yet drew breath.

While the group in black continued in their innocent excitement, the girl moved ever so slightly. She returned Elisabeth’s gaze. A single tear rolled out of her sole remaining eye. Her tongue was gone, as were her teeth. She still had lips, though, and they mouthed a silent plea.

Kill me.

Not save me.

Elisabeth snapped her fingers.

A heavy *thump* echoed out as an iron stake pierced the girl’s heart clean through. Then a moment later, blood sprayed up from her chest and dyed the chandelier bright red. The girl who’d been eaten alive was dead.

The room went silent. Nobody had expected that from the Torture Princess in the slightest.

Eventually, though, one of the people—probably a noble—spoke up.

“W-was there something wrong with the sacrifice?”

“Oh, shut up. I have one question for you lot, and one question alone.”

The group straightened their backs in alarm at the Torture Princess’s words. Elisabeth smiled bewitchingly to set them at ease. They let out deep sighs, captivated by her beguiling expression.

Elisabeth raised her fair arm and pointed at the dead girl.

“Any among you who did not partake in the banquet, raise your hand now.”

A troubled murmur ran through the air. However, most of the group proudly shook their heads no. That said, there was one sole exception. Unable to withstand the others' animosity, one younger man raised his hand.

One of the others must have forced him to come along with them. Even before he raised his hand, his face was pale as a sheet. He also had no cutlery or plate, so it would appear that his declaration was true.

"I see, I see. Right, then."

Elisabeth lowered her hand. Everyone looked at her expectantly. In contrast with the rest of the crowd's excitement, though, the young man let out a pathetic little scream. None of them had any doubt that his failure to participate in the sacrificial rite had angered the Torture Princess. She was going to brutally kill him. Everyone there trembled in unconcealed anticipation.

Elisabeth gave the young man her finest smile.

Then she snapped her fingers.

"…Huh?"

A dumbfounded voice sounded out from behind her.

It was the man who guided her there. He blinked several times.

His head had toppled off his neck, and he was holding it in his hands.

*

Even separated from his torso, the man's head continued to blink.

His eyes turned upward and looked at his neck as blood began spurting forth from it. He gawked at it in shock. Then his lips went slack, and his body collapsed onto the floor while still holding his head. His feet flopped back and forth like fish out of water.

All the while, his blood spread farther and farther across the carpet, seeping into it and dying it crimson.

After a slight delay, the screams started. The room descended into a panic.

Elisabeth, the only calm person present, simply shrugged.

"'Just like the Torture Princess,' eh? You have nerve, I'll give you that… But know this—you were under a grave misapprehension. I have no patience for those who would use me for their own ends or make me their lapdog. 'Tis an insult of the highest order, and I've slain all who tried heretofore. I must admit, though, this banquet you've thrown truly is not unlike my own. I may be unto a demon, but you lot are no different. Very well! I recognize you, then, as having deviated from humanity's path!"

Elisabeth spread her arms wide in a haughty, magnanimous gesture. This time, the smile on her blood-drenched face was of a wholly different nature than it had been before. When she made her sonorous declaration, her expression was downright villainous.

“And as such, this is a task well befitting the Torture Princess! For killing those who are unto demons is a task that belongs to those just as wretched!”

Sometimes, the only thing that could kill evil was a different brand of evil.

That was one of the world’s many truths.

After all, those who sang the praises of righteousness would never have been able to find this underground banquet. To be invited here, one would have to be the kind of evil that other evildoers looked up to. And only someone evil would be able to tell just how wicked the banquet truly was.

For Elisabeth could tell—mercy would be wasted on their kind, and they were unfit to receive even the faintest of amnesties. She could tell that the girl before her wasn’t the first one they’d eaten alive. No, the victims whose blood stained those walls numbered in the hundreds.

This was a place that was well worth being called a demon’s banquet hall.

And as such, there was but one act for the Torture Princess to take.

“Duke of Exeter’s Daughter!”

Elisabeth’s voice echoed out loud and clear, and a torrent of darkness and flower petals whirled up in response. A storm of black and crimson swept violently through the room.

Then it vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. In its place stood an adorable young girl.

The guests all shrank back and cowered in fear. Several of them let out confused yelps.

The girl gave them an elegant bow. Her flaxen hair rustled, setting off her amber eyes. She was wearing an understated dark-green dress, and it was adorned with a white lace collar and a porcelain brooch. At a glance, she looked like an ordinary young girl. What was strange, though, was that there were four of her. Their faces were the same down to the smallest detail.

One might think they were quadruplets, but that wasn’t right, either. Even that wouldn’t account for how unnaturally identical they were. It was like something straight out of a nightmare.

To drive home that point, the arms extending from their sleeves clearly weren’t those of a human. Their fingers were made of metal and were the perfect size for binding a person’s limbs. It was like someone had taken a sheltered young maiden and replaced part of her flesh with restraints.

The girls gracefully made their way over to the pedestal. Then they used their restraints to grab the stake stuck in the human sacrifice.

“““Heave-ho!”””

As they called out in unison, they wrenched the stake free. They then rolled the corpse onto the floor, blood spurting all over them in the process. Entrails got spread everywhere, ruining the expensive-looking carpet. Once they were done, the four of them stood in an elegant little line.

Elisabeth let out a whisper in a voice like honeyed venom.

“Judgment is handed down, and I am she who hands it. Behold, as I take your dull destinies and forever alter them.”

*

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

A violent scream sounded out.

A horrible, graphic noise filled the air, and it was soon followed by a desperate moan.

The victim’s body was torn in half at the waist, and organs and guts spilled from the fleshy tear. Several other such corpses were already piled atop the floor. Even though the air was thick with the stench of blood, the girls’ smiles hadn’t faded in the slightest. And why would they? Duke of Exeter’s Daughter was a torture rack given flesh.

Never once had they felt qualms or revulsion at the prospect of stretching people out.

The girls tossed the new corpse aside, then set off and walked in formation by the group of people cowering stock-still by the wall. Finally, they stopped before one portly man in particular.

“You.”

The man had been holding his breath, afraid that he’d get picked if he so much as moved. His eyes went wide when he discovered that his efforts had been in vain. He swallowed, then let out a throat-shattering scream.

The girls quickly reached out before he could make a break for it, binding his limbs with their metal restraints. Then they hoisted him up like a pig on a spit and began carrying him in cordial unison.

“”””Heave-ho. Heave-ho. Heave-ho. Heave-ho. Heave-ho.”””””

“Please, no, no, stop, I’ll do anything, no, aaaaaaaagh!”

The girls plopped the fat man down on the stone pedestal like it was a cutting board. Then they began pulling on his limbs. His joints began breaking and dislocating. His skin tore, and his flesh started to stretch and snap apart.

His voice was hoarse by then, but he continued screaming all the same. However, the girls just kept on smiling. They launched into a happy song.

“”””Father asks a question, aren’t you glad? Have you been good, or have you been bad? If you’ve been bad, then it’s stretching time, until you decide to confess your crimes! You can scream and say no, no, no, but even if you do, we won’t let you go!”””””

“Stop, stop, please, Elisabeth, ELISABEEEEEEEEETH!”

“Oh, don’t go squealing like a pig. Surely you people should know from your own experience, but it normally takes far longer for a torture victim to die. Though I can’t exactly keep your compatriots waiting, so today, you get the abridged version. ’Tis little reason to weep and moan, no? If anything, you should be grateful for how merciful I’m being.”

Elisabeth scoffed. The man started foaming at the mouth, unable to even scream anymore. His eyeballs swelled up, and urine began dripping from his nether region. Then came a squelching noise, and the man's innards began gushing out.

Once little more than sinew and intestines were left connecting the two halves of the body together, the girls stopped pulling. They tossed it aside, as though they'd grown bored of it. Then they turned around. Their hair rustled as they blinked their eight innocent eyes.

There were barely any survivors left, but the few remaining ones stayed paralyzed in fear by the wall.

The girls strode forth once more. One of them began pointing her dainty finger from person to person.

"Are you next? Are you next? Are you next? You're next!"

"Forgive us! Please, Torture Princess, have mercy!"

The woman's thick, black-painted lips quivered as she rushed toward Elisabeth. She knelt, knees trembling, and held her hands together as if in prayer. Tears streamed from her eyes as she made her desperate supplication.

"Is our sin truly worthy of such punishment? Surely, you realize how twisted the Church is, don't you? But if so…then why?! Why subject us to such cruel judgment?!"

"Oh, I'm well aware of how perverse the Church is. Any group that employs inquisitors, lets extremists run rampant in their ranks, and retains saints the way Church does is liable to bring about disaster hitherto unseen. But I ask this of you."

Elisabeth reached out a slender finger and propped the woman's chin up.

Then she curled her crimson lips as she offered her a sweet whisper.

"What in the world does that have to do with your banquet?"

"Th-that's… We needed to demonstrate our rebellion against the Church, to venerate demons…"

"No, no. There's no need to be shy. Come now, say it with pride. 'Twas fun, wasn't it? I should know. The pain of others is a delight beyond compare, and their screams are like the finest of symphonies. You supped your fill of those luxuries, did you not? But now the bill for your feast has come due. Dissatisfaction with some other group hardly begins to justify your grim indulgences."

Elisabeth swung her foot and kicked the silver plate the woman had used. It went flying, as did the sticky chunks of meat atop it. Her plate had been piled notably higher than the others. The woman let out a pained squeak.

As the woman's teeth began chattering, Elisabeth lovingly stroked her chin.

"As long as the Church opposes the demons and works to maintain order in the world, I shall willingly serve as their lapdog. And once my task is

finished, I shall pay my bill in kind and give myself to the flames. Such is the fate I've chosen. And, ah, what a fitting end it shall be."

"B-but…why? Why subject yourself to that humiliation? Your power is beyond that of even the demons… You could just summon a new demon, make a contract, and break the Church's shackles, couldn't you? Why just resign yourself to dying a cow's death?!"

"Then I shall ask you the reverse. Why *should* I have to do any of that?"

"Huh?"

The Torture Princess's question rang with honest curiosity. It was enough to make the woman forget the peril she was in for a moment.

A dumbfounded silence descended on them. The smell of blood wafted through the air as Elisabeth quietly gazed down at the woman.

Then with an expression that seemed almost reminiscent of the Saint's, Elisabeth dispassionately went on.

"Despots are killed, tyrants are hung, and slaughterers are slaughtered. Such is the way of the world. The demise of torturers should be garnished with their own screams as they sink to Hell with no chance for salvation. Only at such a time is a torturer's life truly complete. So why balk at it? Were you people ignorant of even that basic truth?"

Elisabeth looked downward as though in newfound comprehension. Her black hair cascaded in front of her, concealing her expression. Yet even in spite of that, the woman could tell—the Torture Princess was furious. Scathing malice danced on Elisabeth's tongue as she spoke once more.

"Ah, I see. I see… So you indulged in the flesh of the innocent, not even knowing that."

The Torture Princess looked up. Elisabeth curled her lips into a fierce smile.

All of a sudden, the woman felt a heavy tap on her shoulder. She nervously turned to look. There, she was greeted by four identical smiles. She screamed, but the girls captured her without missing a beat.

And with that, Duke of Exeter's Daughter dragged her off, kicking aside corpses as they sang their merry song.

"""""Father asks a question, aren't you glad? Have you been good, or have you been bad? If you've been bad, then it's stretching time, until you decide to confess your crimes! You can scream and say no, no, no, but even if you do, we won't let you go!"""""

"No, no, nooooo! Please, Torture Princess, have mercy, I beg of you! I… No. No, I'll never apologize! Curse you, dammit! I curse you to death, you shameless sow! You're no different from me! Nobody will save you! Not God, not Diablo, not anyooooooone!"

"Aye, indeed! None shall save me! God and Diablo have abandoned me, as has all creation! And so be it! So be it. Go on, you fool, curse me to your dying breath!"

"Go to hell, go to hell, GO TO HELL, ELISABEEEEEAAAAAARGH!"

Midway through, the shrill shout transformed into a muddled scream. The woman's torso was beginning to tear. Her back audibly creaked through her tight corset. Her tongue flopped out of her mouth, and blood and drool spilled out along with it. It was only then that her chest finally burst.

Elisabeth didn't flinch at the spray of blood or guts, just as she hadn't at the woman's hatred. The girls let go of the body, and it collapsed with a *splat* atop the veritable mountain of corpses. No more desperate pleas were forthcoming. The executions continued on dispassionately.

Eventually, Elisabeth calmly surveyed her surroundings.

The room was empty of movement. The banquet was over.

Or so she thought.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Suddenly, an absurd cry sounded out, and someone dashed off like an arrow from the corner of the room.

Elisabeth, thinking she'd missed someone, made to snap her fingers again. The moment before she did, though, she stopped in her tracks.

"…You?"

It was a young man, his fists clenched and his face as pale as a sheet. He ran deeper into the room, some sort of resolve evident on his face. He reached out, grabbed the ornamental ax hanging from the wall, and turned its massive blade toward Elisabeth.

Elisabeth quietly returned his gaze.

It was the one person she had planned to leave alive.

The sole man who hadn't participated in the banquet.

*

Impulsive bravery burned bright in his eyes. It was plain as day what he had resolved himself to do.

Elisabeth shrugged in exasperation.

"What's this now? You fancy yourself a hero or something? You never took part in the banquet to begin with, so it's not as though I've any intention of killing you."

"Shut up! You…you're no different than they were! How could you do something like this?!"

Spit flew from the youth's mouth as he shouted. The pair of atrocities he'd just borne witness to had stretched his spirit to the breaking point. Now, powerless as he was, he was choosing to fight. However, Elisabeth only shook her head.

"A question, then. Where was this foolhardy bravery of yours to be found when the girl was still alive?"

"I—I…"

The boy squeezed the ax so tightly that it made the bones in his fingers press up against his skin.

Elisabeth sighed, then looked around at the ghastly scene surrounding them. Having finished her task, Duke of Exeter's Daughter was standing in a neat little line. Elisabeth turned her gaze back away from her, then spoke.

"Why, if it's the brutality you object to, you could have even made this stand of yours back when *they* were alive. So why now? What will this baying of yours accomplish? Whose pain will it heal? At this late hour, how —?"

"Be quiet! Shut up already, you monster! Yeah, you're right. I regret it. I regret it, okay! This is what I should have done the moment I stepped into this damn room! I don't know how long it'll take me to atone for not doing so, but I'll do whatever I have to!"

"I see. Well, I know not the scale of your resolve, but if it's resolve you have, then I shan't say any more."

"But here and now, what I need to do is kill you! How am I supposed to move forward if I let a monster like you live?!"

Tears welled up in the youth's eyes as he shouted. Elisabeth nodded her understanding.

When a person met a monster—

—even if it posed no threat to them personally, it was still their duty to kill it.

Such was the fate of people and monsters.

The young man raised his ax high and charged at the Torture Princess. However, his movements were so slow, it was almost sad. One snap of her fingers was all it would have taken for Elisabeth to end things. However, she didn't move a muscle.

She merely returned the youth's gaze.

That, too, is one of this world's many truths.

Sometimes, the only thing that could kill evil was a different brand of evil—

—but in the end, only good could break that cycle of malice.

Elisabeth Le Fanu stood motionless. The executioner's ax drew ever closer.

Then it happened.

"That's right. If this was the only thing you saw of her, then that would be a perfectly reasonable conclusion to draw. After all, it is an undeniable truth."

"…Huh?"

A dignified voice cut through the air. A slender figure made its descent and swooped down in front of Elisabeth.

Then a maid made a gentle landing.

Her outfit looked wholly out of place, but the emerald eyes beneath her silver hair were as serious as could be.

"…However, I refuse to let you call her a monster."

"Hina?"

Elisabeth spoke the woman's name aloud.

The maid, Hina, swung her halberd.

The young man's ax head was cut clean from the handle. Its blade went spinning through the air, eventually planting itself in corpses' torsos. As the youth tripped over his feet, Hina, still holding her halberd, dropped her voice an octave.

"Never again utter such rudeness to my dearest Lady Elisabeth."

"Wha…? I don't—"

"And heeere I goooo! Hachaaaaaah!"

The young man started to let out a bewildered yelp, but he was cut off by a loud, cheerful cry.

At some point, the doorway had gotten thrown wide-open, and something large and heavy came hurtling through it.

It was a massive piece of bone-in meat.

After spinning through the air, it struck the young man square in the forehead. It made for a bizarre sight, but it was apparently effective nonetheless. The youth keeled over backward, then went still.

It looked like it had given him a concussion. Elisabeth blinked in confusion.

It wasn't a dream. It was reality. And there were two people she was well acquainted with standing behind her.

Specifically, Hina and the Butcher.

"Now hold on a minute… What are you two doing here?"

"One thing led to another, you see!"

"And we ended up tailing you!"

With the grisly room to their backs, the two of them proudly puffed out their chests.

“One thing led to another,” eh? Elisabeth scratched her cheek. The fact of the matter was, considering how slow he was moving, she still could have returned the young man’s attack with time to spare. She had never been in any real danger.

Yet somehow or other…

…she felt as though she’d been saved nonetheless.

*

The carriage rattled along the dark night road.

The driver who’d been manning the reins on their way there had already fled, so the Butcher was filling in for him. *“Why, I could do that with my eyes closed!”* he’d claimed. And sure enough, he was handling the carriage more deftly than even the driver had.

There are mysteries about when it comes to that man. Is there anything he can’t do?

As Elisabeth pondered that question, she stole a glance at Hina, who was sitting beside her. Hina said nothing, a silence that Elisabeth mirrored. However, their expressions were like polar opposites of each other.

Hina was smiling happily, but Elisabeth was frowning in discontent.

Eventually, Elisabeth looked back away from her seatmate and quietly spoke.

“…You’ve no objections, Hina?”

“About what, might I ask?”

“You saw the atrocities I committed back in that room. You ordered the man not to call me a monster, but…your master is Kaito, not I. There’s no need for you to flatter me. I appreciate your diligent service, don’t get me wrong, but you needn’t pretend to hold me in such regard.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Elisabeth, but please don’t misunderstand me.”

Hina’s voice rang out dignified and resolute. Elisabeth turned back toward her so fast, it was like she’d been slapped in the face.

Hina was staring straight at her. Even in the dim, her emerald eyes shone like jewels. She softly opened her mouth, then spoke with a gentle calmness.

“I might not have a sense of morals the way humans do, but I am aware of how your past deeds and cruel nature have drawn hatred and criticism from many. I can’t refute what they say…but at the same time, it’s my right to choose who I want to protect, and who I want to hold dear.”

My heart is mine and mine alone.

Not even my beloved master can deny me that.

That was what Hina was saying. Elisabeth had no answer for that. Instead, she just stared off into space.

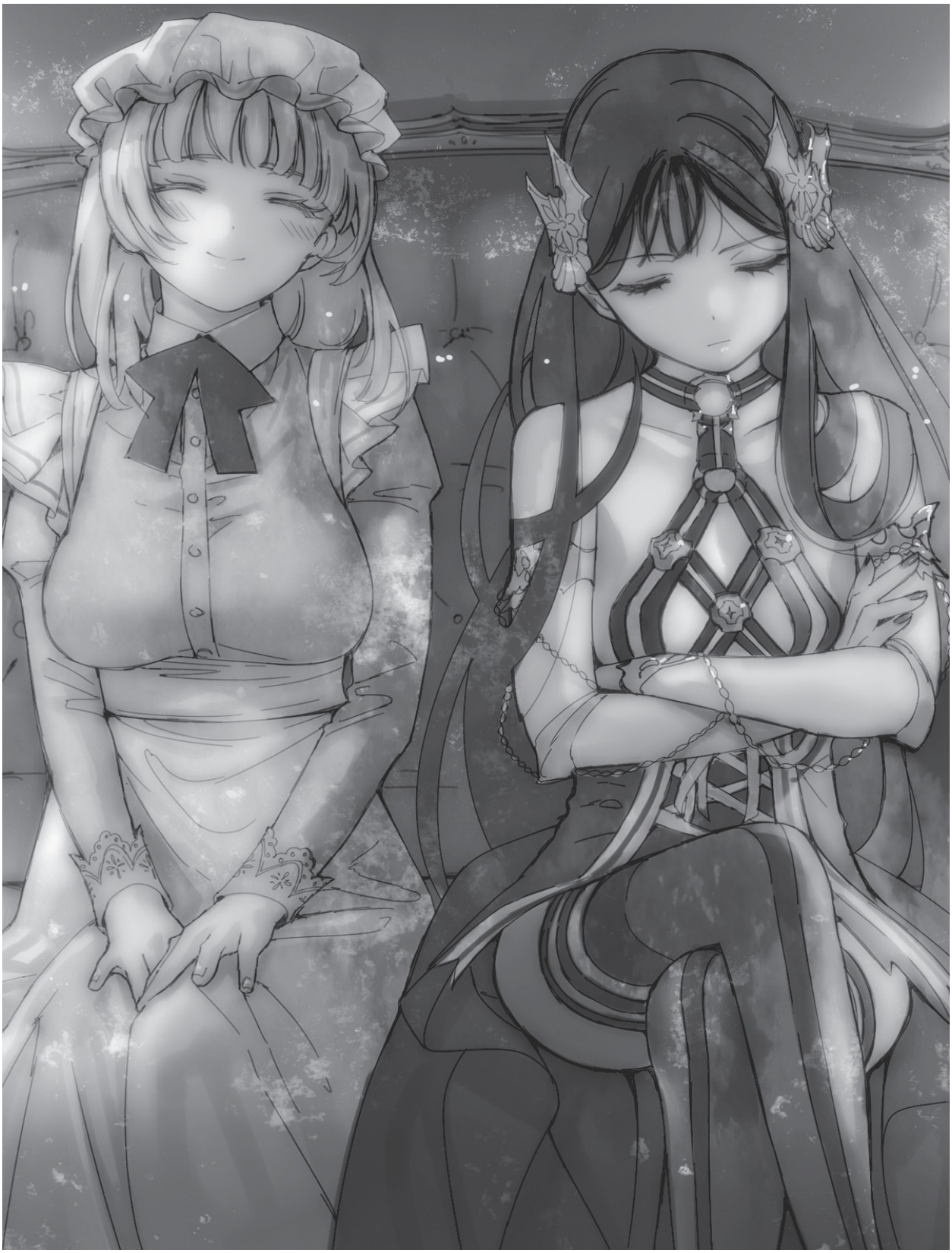
Eventually, she curiously posed a question.

“…How utterly puzzling. What about me do you find so worthy of your admiration?”

“Hmhm, there are oh-so-many things… But the specifics are a secret. That’s something you’ll have to figure out for yourself someday, Lady Elisabeth. It wouldn’t mean anything if I just told you.”

Hina playfully raised a finger in front of her lips.

Yet again, Elisabeth had no answer for that. It seemed wrong for the Torture Princess to affirm herself in that way after committing such a massacre. Beside her, her automaton companion kept on smiling. It was the expression of someone who knew their own heart inside and out.



As the Butcher let out a strange “Heigh-ho!” cheer from up in the driver’s seat, Elisabeth let out a low murmur.

“You’re a strict one, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes! I may dote on Master Kaito, but even I know when it’s time for some tough love!”

Hina puffed up her chest with pride. Elisabeth shook her head in defeat. The tension drained from her face, and a smile spread across it—the first genuine smile she’d worn that day. She nodded.

“You know, in the interest of avoiding a large hassle, what say we—?”

“Keep this all a secret from Master Kaito? Oh, of course.”

They exchanged a glance, and with that, their girls’ promise was official. A moment later, they both broke out into laughter.

Another strange “Heigh-ho!” echoed through the air as the carriage rattled beneath the dawn sky.

And back at the castle, a certain dim-witted, softhearted boy was still fast asleep.

A Message
from
Someone (4)

A Message from Someone (4)

To begin with, though—

—what does it really mean to go mad?

Whenever I start pondering that question, I immediately feel my sanity begin to slip away. *Big deal*, you might think, *coming from a self-proclaimed lunatic.* And you'd be completely right to do so. But it's the truth, so I'm afraid there isn't much I can do about it.

Honestly, though, I'm really not sure. When was it, I wonder, that I went completely mad?

Was it when I chose this world's appointed time? When I sowed the seeds of evil throughout it? When I made an attendant who would serve me and me alone?

Was it when I brought about the worst possible result, one that could never be undone? Was it when I decided to take responsibility for the deed I'd committed?

Or was it, perhaps, long, long ago—

—when I made up my mind to perform that summoning?

When I decided that I wanted to save the world?

If so, though, wouldn't that mean that there has been something messed up about me all along?

That there is something wrong with me as a person? That it was a mistake for me to ever have been born? Surely, that's too harsh. It's not as though a baby can bear sin. Would the mistake lie with the very world that created such a person, then?

No, no, I'm getting this all wrong. Blame and criticism, I can take. They're far more pleasant than the blind faith and respect I was subjected to before, after all. But at the same time, I can feel it keenly.

Is there anyone in this world who has the right to condemn me?

Who? Who has that right? Certainly not you all.

You don't know anything.

Not a single, solitary thing.

I'm not the Saint. I'm not the Suffering Woman. I'm not someone worthy of respect.

I'm just a person. Just another lunatic.

Yet—

Yet even so—

—I've been alone all this time.

Alice called Lewis Father, and Lewis didn't deny it.

I supposed that meant they were parent and child.

"Look, Mr. White Rabbit, carrot pudding. You still have that fever, right? Your appetite's been gone for so long, so I made it for you myself. Just like Father taught me!

"And remember, you have to take your medicine, or your arm won't stay on. Now, say aah!"

Alice seemed to have taken a liking to me.

It was odd, though. My ears were gray, but she kept on calling me "White Rabbit."

The phrase itself seemed to have some meaning to her, as it was part of a collection of things she liked to say over and over.

Things like White Rabbit, Wonderland, Queen of Hearts, and Off with his head!

I had no idea what any of them meant, but the phrases sounded almost as though they'd come from a distant era in a foreign land.

Being cooped up in my bed as I was, the days seemed to stretch on for ages. The underground cemetery was dim and gloomy, and it felt like the people coming and going were always talking to one another about something unsettling.

I will say, though, that it had been a while since the last time I didn't have to worry about where my next meal would come from. To me, that alone made it a pleasant place to live. Even though it wasn't their main base, there was still something horrible festering in the darkness—I could sense it—but I decided to just ignore it and let myself rest.

From time to time, Alice would bring over a sopping-wet towel and brush it across my face. Thinking back on it now, I think she was trying to wipe away my sweat for me.

Then she would sing me an odd little song as I slept.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall."

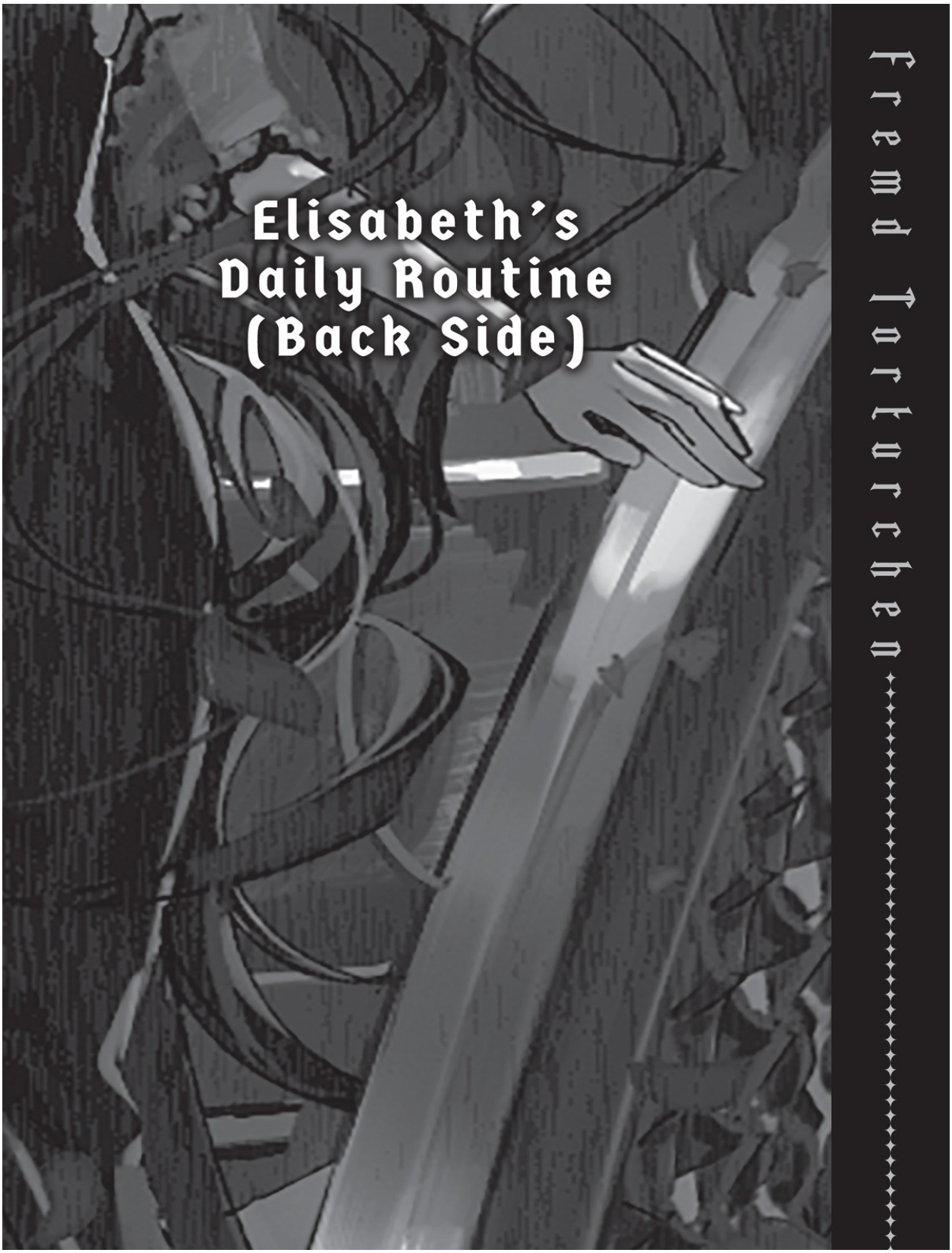
One of her favorite things to do was to play with the rocking chair beside my bed. Oh, how she loved that rocking chair. She said that she and her father had built it together, and she spent countless idle hours sitting in it, occasionally reaching over to tug on my rabbit ears.

One day, though, things were different.

That evening, Alice must have nodded off by my side.

I was woken up by a horrible noise.

It was Alice, apologizing to someone through heavy sobs.


Elisabeth's
Daily Routine
(Back Side)
Fremd Torturchen

Elisabeth’s Daily Routine (Back Side)

Ever since the moment she was first turned on—

—Hina the automaton had been Kaito Sena’s eternal lover.

In his sickness and in his health, she was his soldier, his love outlet, his sex doll, and most importantly, his faithful companion and maid. Constant caring and devotion were Hina’s trademarks.

However, even she had a secret that she couldn’t share with her lover.

Specifically, it was about the “brief little indulgence” she enjoyed before getting to work on breakfast.

Each morning, Hina would go to Kaito’s room and press herself against his door. Kaito’s traumatic past life left him frequently plagued with nightmares, so Hina wanted to make sure she could “accidentally” wake him up whenever he started moaning in his sleep. If his rest was peaceful, though, then that was when the fun *really* started.

After all, Hina’s secret hobby was listening to Kaito breathe as he slept.

Each and every day, she would devote the considerable full force of her automaton hearing capabilities toward that one task.

Then as she listened to him, she would trace idle little circles in the air with her fingers.

“*Pant, pant…* Oh, Master Kaito… You’re sleeping so soundly, so defenselessly today. It’s ever so adorable! Why, it hardly seems fair for one person to be so cool and so lovable! Yet nobody in the whole wide world is your better in either regard! Oh, I fall harder for you each day! …Eep, you just said ‘mmm’! How erotic! Oh, if only my most fervent wish could come true, and I could wake you up each morning with a passionate smooch!”

“H-hmm… It feels as though it might be dangerous to call out to her right now, doesn’t it? Ah, but nothing ventured, nothing gained! Now here I go! Ahem… Ms. Lovely Maid?”

“Eep! Wh-who goes there?! Who’s eavesdropping on me?!”

Hina leaped up with a start and wasted no time in assuming a combat pose.

She normally preferred to fight with a halberd, but she was still a force to be reckoned with even when unarmed. She could snap a bear’s neck with her bare hands, and a single one of her kicks could knock a man’s head clean off. And the other party was well aware of that fact.

He quickly raised his hands in a show of surrender.

“I come in peace! It’s me—the one who everyone loves, the one who’s always by your side when you need him most! Your humble Butcher!”

“…Oh, Mr. Butcher?”

“Me, friend!”

“Ah, my apologies… You won’t tell Master Kaito about any of what you just heard, will you, Mr. Butcher? I’m sure I can count on your discretion. And on that note, welcome to Lady Elisabeth’s castle! What brings you here today?”

“Oh goodness. I feel as though if you trusted me any less, my head and torso would be sharing a tearful farewell right now…”

He shivered, and atop his shoulder, the large round sack he was carrying, which was covered in X-shaped patches, shook in turn.

The Butcher was a demi-human merchant who often frequented Elisabeth’s castle. The tattered black cloak he wore covered everything but his scaly hands and feet, adding to his already considerable air of mystery. When Hina saw him tremble like a scared puppy, she hurriedly moved to comfort him.

“Oh no, there’s no need to be afraid! Worry not—as long as you don’t become an enemy of my beloved Master Kaito, I would never dream of attacking you!”

“For words intended to set my heart at ease, they still have a decidedly frightening ring to them… Ah, but I have a task that needs doing, so I had better pull myself together, hadn’t I? I apologize for showing up at such an early hour, but the thing is, I believe I left something here.”

“Oh my! What is it?”

“One of my pieces of meat on the bone.”

Suddenly, a cry of *“Again?! How do you keep forgetting those?!”* echoed out from Kaito’s room. However, it didn’t sound like he was actually awake. What a dedicated straight man he was. Meanwhile, Hina gently tilted her head to the side.

“Oh, goodness me… I’m afraid I have some unfortunate news. When Lady Elisabeth was drinking and making merry last night, I believe she grilled it and ate it.”

“I’m too late already?! Rgh… How transient and fleeting the life of meat is…”

“Hmm. Come to think of it, though, while I’m certain she got *something* out of the ice-spirit fridge, it might have actually been something else. Here’s an idea—it’s a little earlier than usual, but I was just about to head to the kitchen to prepare Lady Elisabeth’s morning tea. Would you like to come with me and check?”

“Ah, you’re too gracious! A thousand thanks!”

Without Hina accompanying him, he couldn’t enter the kitchen. It was physically possible, to be sure, but the prospect of Elisabeth finding out was a terrifying one indeed. The Butcher leaped up and down in joy at this fortuitous outcome.

Hina smiled genially. Early as it was, her daily indulgence was complete, and she set off.

Together, the two of them headed for the kitchen.

It was a decision that neither of them put a great deal of thought into.

*

There was one step remaining on Hina’s morning itinerary.

Namely, preparing Elisabeth’s morning tea.

Each day, she would take the ambient temperature and humidity into account to mix the perfect ingredients for a cup of tea that would hit the spot just right. The thing was, there wasn’t much else she could do for her masters in the morning. Elisabeth’s dress was constructed out of magic, so she never needed assistance getting dressed, and Kaito had firmly turned down Hina’s offers to help him out with his morning routine or bring him any sort of beverage.

As such, she poured all her efforts into Elisabeth’s tea.

This morning, as always, her maid’s spirit fired up as she mixed the tea leaves.

The weather was slated to be chilly, and while it wasn’t supposed to rain, it was definitely going to be overcast.

“In that case, the situation calls for a tea that can warm up body and mind alike to start the day off right!”

With her mission decided, Hina opened up the white cupboard before her. Inside, there was a large selection of cube-shaped boxes.

She popped off a few of their lids, then scooped out some leaves with a silver spoon, blending together, in perfect, exquisite ratios, types that warmed up the body with varieties that had refreshing flavors. Then she added some dried red flower petals and bitter orange seeds.

That way, the tea would come out in a nice transparent shade of vermilion and would have a sweet aroma to pick up one’s spirits.

After successfully finishing the mixing process, Hina turned to move on to the next step. Then she blinked.

The Butcher was standing in front of the ice-spirit fridge, visibly at a loss. Hina hurried over to him.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Butcher?”

“All the meat on the bone I intentionally delivered is still here. In other words, the one that Madam Elisabeth ate last night must have been the one I forgot! Ohhhh, what a cruel turn of fate.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry. But knowing Lady Elisabeth, I’m sure she at least enjoyed it more than anyone else in the whole world would have!”

“Well, well, well, I suppose that is a silver lining… Being enjoyed is the greatest joy that meat can have, after all.”

“It really is, isn’t it? Come on now, please, don’t look so down! Here, why don’t I prepare you a light snack? First, though, I should check the weather just in case so I can… Hmm?”

The stonework kitchen was cramped and claustrophobic, but it did at least have a window for ventilation. When Hina rushed over to it, she squinted, her artificial skeleton creaking as she pressed her head against the gaps in the window’s iron grille.

By craning her neck, she could just make out the area around the castle’s front entrance—and, more importantly, the person leaving the castle through it.

Thanks to her preeminent vision, Hina could recognize the figure’s silky black hair even in the dead of night.

“…Lady Elisabeth? Shouldn’t you still be asleep?”

“Hmhm, ah, such beauty recognizable even from behind! That’s Madam Elisabeth, sure as a dragon has wings!”

All of a sudden, the Butcher’s head popped up beside Hina’s. However, he was too short for that to make sense. The secret, as it turned out, was that he was standing atop his sack, and what’s more, he was perched precariously on his tiptoes.

Totally unfazed by his sudden appearance, Hina asked him a question.

“Oh, Mr. Butcher, you can see her, too?”

“Heh-heh-heh. To tell you the truth, I’m made of sterner stuff than the average demi-human! There’s a reason I’ve lived as long as I have, I’ll have you know!”

He puffed up his chest with pride. However, doing so caused him to lose his balance. He wobbled back and forth for a moment, then puffed up his chest again. Hina gave him an impressed round of applause. This time, there was no straight man to be found.

Meanwhile, as the two of them shared their friendly little chat, Elisabeth kept on walking. Soon, she vanished into the tree line.

Hina tilted her head to the side. How very odd. Where could Elisabeth be going at such an early hour? Hina crossed her arms. The Butcher did likewise. Then they stepped away from the window in unison and turned to look at each other.

“You know, Mr. Butcher, this is just my intuition speaking, but…”

"…it feels as though there's something afoot, doesn't it?"

The two of them both nodded.

And with that, the curtain rose on their small little grand adventure.

*

The two of them were both the type to act first and think things through later.

After making their decision, both Hina and the Butcher got to work without wasting a moment. Hina grabbed her magic leather bag on the off chance they'd need it, and the two of them rushed outside all helter-skelter and made their way into the forest after Elisabeth.

Luckily for them, they were able to hide in the tall underbrush without anyone spotting them.

As Hina carefully carried the hem of her maid uniform to avoid getting it dirty, she looked to her side.

Standing there, she saw a big green blob. At some point, the Butcher had taken some leaves and grass and affixed them all over his cloak.

"That looks very professional."

"Hmhmhm, at long last, the time has come for me to leverage the skills I've developed in the long battles to establish this world's distribution channels! Behold—Field-Mode Butcher!"

The Butcher replied to Hina's compliment in a tone dripping with confidence. All the way back at the castle, Kaito's unconscious straight-man retort of "*What the hell does that even mean?!*" echoed through the halls. Sadly, though, there was no one there to hear it.

Down in the dark forest, however, a voice overcome with emotion was heard by just about everyone.

"It's a wondrous honor to be graced with your radiant presence, O beautiful Torture Princess. O ravishing Elisabeth Le Fanu!"

A group of birds took off at the sudden noise, cawing loudly as they flew away. Hina and the Butcher quickly pulled their heads back, then looked out again.

The speaker quivered passionately and spread his arms wide. As he did, Elisabeth's mood grew visibly more sullen. This clearly wasn't someone she was excited to be meeting.

""Hmm,"" Hina and the Butcher murmured. They turned their gazes to the other party.

It was a middle-aged man wearing a high-quality black cloak, with a bowler hat perched atop his head. An ornate mask gleamed on his face, no doubt to capture the attention of any who looked at it and get them to forget the rest of his appearance.

However, his voice was obnoxiously shrill. If Hina used her Self-Recording Device, identifying him would be trivial.

"…Mr. Butcher, I fear this is terribly rude of me to say, but I get this strange feeling that he's kind of an idiot."

"Worry not, Ms. Lovely Maid. That there is an authentic Grade A idiot."

The two of them nodded quietly as they completed their blunt evaluation of the man's nature.

Then Elisabeth spoke.

"You wake a person at this ungodly hour, then have the nerve to say I'm 'gracing you with my presence'? If every word that comes out of your mouth is going to be this insipid, I've half a mind to slice you in two where you stand."

"Hyoh-heh, I suppose that's the Torture Princess for you. That pride, that arrogance…how fitting for the one who will guide us and share our path!"

"What? No, a rebuttal such as that hardly scratches the surface of the Torture Princess's arrogance. What are you, some wet-behind-the-ears noble? If the Church found out you were saying such things, they wouldn't just stop at seizing your assets, you know. They'd subject you to a full-on inquisition."

As though to support their hypothesis, Elisabeth leveled one biting remark at the man after another. Despite having the wind thoroughly drained from his sails, the man valiantly continued talking. After a short back-and-forth, Elisabeth shot him a question.

"Then I shall ask you thus—are you a demon worshipper? An organization that stands against the Church? Or perhaps the leader of a religion all your own?"

Hina and the Butcher nodded in agreement. It was painfully obvious what the man's affiliation was.

Plus, given that an anti-Church organization had sent Elisabeth an invitation, Hina had a pretty good idea what they wanted from her.

The Torture Princess was beautiful, powerful, and shouldered peerless sins, all of which made her a perfect symbol.

There was no shortage of people in the world who wanted to get their hands on her, and the man clearly numbered among their ranks.

"It would seem I don't need to introduce myself, I see… Very well! Then let's talk, you and I. As you surmised, we stand against the coercive brainwashing the Church conducts on the masses, and we hold demons in the highest regard in their stead."

"I don't doubt it for a moment. You're as black a lot as they come; that much is clear enough from your garb. You people do love that color, don't you?"

Acknowledging her remark, the man launched into a tirade about the Church's inconsistencies.

Hina and the Butcher nodded some more. Hina wasn't an expert on the topic by any means, but she was aware of the Church's corruption. Kaito had told her about the deeds of an inquisitor named Clueless, and that

aside, Hina had a bone to pick with any organization that proclaimed themselves good and just while forcing the Torture Princess to fight the demons all on her own.

In contrast, the Butcher didn't seem to have any specific thoughts on the matter. The darkness beneath his leaf-covered hood was simply black, just the same as always.

Then all of a sudden, Elisabeth said something wholly unexpected.

"That meat was fresh. *Were they yet living* when you sliced it off?"

"Ah, so you enjoyed our little present!"

"…'Present'?"

Hina couldn't help but let out a puzzled little murmur. Apparently, the man had given something to Elisabeth. Hina thought back over what they'd just said. *"The meat was fresh." "Yet living." "Sliced it off."*

No matter what it was, it couldn't have been anything wholesome. This time, the Butcher had something to say as well.

"Rgh, just because they're alive when you cut it off doesn't mean the meat's necessarily going to be any good, you know. Some meat is better off being aged in a storehouse, and whether or not you drain the blood has a huge impact on the flavor as well."

As the Butcher drew from his seemingly bottomless well of expertise, Hina decided to forgo commentary so she could focus on Elisabeth's conversation.

The man continued his horrible speech in grand fashion.

"Our group holds rituals, which involve human sacrifices, to deepen our bonds and to further blasphemy against God. We take the offering *alive* and make *beautiful artwork* out of them. Just like you—*just like the Torture Princess*!"

Hina tried to rise to her feet right then and there, but the Butcher quickly grabbed her by the arm.

After pulling her back down, he quietly talked her down as well.

"Do settle down, Ms. Lovely Maid. I understand how you feel—I really do! But the man is talking nonsense! Why, he's best ignored altogether! Besides, if you rush out, he might be able to catch Madam Elisabeth by surprise! Right now, the best thing we can do is wait here and watch them!"

Hina gave his calm words of reason a nod. She clenched her fists tight, but she sat back down all the same.

Meanwhile, Elisabeth's mood visibly shifted. However, the man didn't notice the change.

The Torture Princess gave him a sweet smile.

"I see. So you claim to be imitating me, of all things…"

Such were Elisabeth's words as she gently guessed at the reason the man wanted the Torture Princess on his side. Then she made him an offer in a voice as intoxicating as poisoned liquor.

“First, I must confirm something. Bring me to this meeting place of yours, and I shall see for myself if you’ve prepared a throne befitting the Torture Princess.”

“Y-you’re serious? You’ll become our sponsor—our figurehead?”

“Enough blathering. ’Tis rude to make a lady repeat herself.”

Elisabeth gently raised her fair hand, and the man extended his in kind. His fingers were trembling—perhaps in fear, and perhaps in delight. Elisabeth elegantly took his hand in hers. Then out of the blue, she yanked him toward her.

After bringing her lips close to him, she whispered something in his ear. His eyes went wide.

Then he hurried off with Elisabeth in tow. The driver opened the carriage door, and the two of them boarded it.

Hina and the Butcher were many things, but they were by no means willing to let the opportunity before them slip away. In a flash, the two of them were on their feet.

“Our time has come, Ms. Lovely Maid!”

“I’ll roger that with a big old hurrah!”

Then they broke off at a dash in perfect unison. As the carriage began moving, the two of them lined up side by side and leaped on board. They held on to its roof with their hands and managed to skillfully place their feet so they were only just barely protruding.

The frame lurched. The pair panicked, worried they’d been found out. Fortunately, though, the horses’ strength won out.

The driver assumed that the ride had just hit a rock or something, and the carriage continued on through the forest as though nothing had happened.

The dawn was yet unbroken.

Under the cover of night, the two of them continued their stealthy pursuit.

*

After exiting the forest, the carriage kept going for a good while longer.

Eventually, though, it came to a creaky stop. Hina looked up.

They were beside a dilapidated manor. However, Elisabeth and the others ignored the main building. Instead, they entered its attached chapel and used the secret staircase beneath its altar to head underground. And Hina and the Butcher followed them.

Taking care not to let their footsteps echo or the reflection from their lantern light shine down the tunnel, Hina and the Butcher continued shadowing the other group.

As she quietly strode across the pooled groundwater, Hina let out a whisper.

“Thank goodness you had a lantern on you, Mr. Butcher. Little holes and bumps would never be enough to trip me up, but it’s certainly nice not having to worry about accidentally stepping in mud and having it splash everywhere.”

“Hmhmhm. It’s a wonderful thing, having a lantern and a fire slime in your sack! No gentleman should leave home without them! Why, in two years’ time, everyone’ll be carrying a pair around! Ha-ha-ha!”

The Butcher struck a bizarre pose as he laughed. He seemed oddly confident in his prediction.

Either way, his preparedness had allowed them to make good time down the tunnel. Suddenly, though, Hina stopped in her tracks. However, the Butcher obliviously strode on, so Hina had to grab him by the scruff of his cloak.

“Mr. Butcher, please wait!”

“And a heigh-dee— Hmm? What’s… Ah. They stopped, then?”

Hina nodded. Around the corner, the other party’s light had stopped moving.

It would appear that Elisabeth’s group had reached their destination. The Butcher set his lantern on the ground and blocked its light with his sack. Then the two of them stuck their heads around the corner to start observing.

Elisabeth, the man, and the driver were standing in front of a door. After exchanging some sort of passcode, Elisabeth and the man went inside. The driver stayed behind. He rolled his shoulders, then set off. There was probably some sort of antechamber he was heading to.

Hina and the Butcher exchanged a glance.

Hina nodded. The Butcher grabbed his sack.

Then he took off and shot down the tunnel like an arrow. The driver turned, but it was already too late.

With one fluid motion, the Butcher drew his signature weapon from the sack.

“Cheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeers!”

His war cry was quiet, but he made up for it in vigor.

As the cry echoed down the passageway, his meat on the bone collided with the back of the driver’s head.

The weapon was blunt, but even so, the force from the blow was enough to make the driver collapse. However, the Butcher swooped down and caught him the moment before he hit the ground. In a pointless display of kindness, he even gently plopped the man’s head down on his lap.

Hina gave him a small round of applause, to which the Butcher replied with a big thumbs-up.

“The man is down!”

“That was a very impressive ‘cheers,’ especially for how quiet it was!”

“*That’s what you’re gonna comment on?!*” Kaito cried back at the castle. However, there still wasn’t anyone around to hear him.

Over at the actual site, Hina suddenly looked up. She quickly rushed over to the door.

“Now then, our one obstacle is out of the way! Allow me to check on the situation!”

Just like she had at Kaito’s room, she pressed herself against the door. There was a fleshy, nude etching of the Saint carved on its wooden surface, but Hina paid that fact no heed. She brought her head next to its carved breasts and leveraged the full power of her automaton hearing capabilities.

“W-was there something wrong with the sacrifice?”

“Oh, shut up. I have one question for you lot, and one question alone.”

She could hear Elisabeth talking to someone. Her eyes went wide, and she pulled away from the door.

When she turned back toward the Butcher, he tilted his head to the side in confusion.

“What seems to be the matter, Ms. Lovely Maid?”

“The situation is bad! At this rate, things are definitely going to come to blows!”

“Oh my! Are they preparing for a fight?”

“Lady Elisabeth is pretending not to, but in truth, she actually is! Only someone who knows her as well as I do would be able to tell, but that’s her super-mega-ultra-angry tone!”

Hina rapidly nodded up and down. And in no time at all, her conjecture was proven true.

Screams started echoing out from inside the room. Hina pressed herself back against the door to check what was going on.

When she did, she was greeted by a voice dripping with bloodlust and rage.

“‘Just like the Torture Princess,’ eh? You have nerve, I’ll give you that… I must admit, though, this banquet you’ve thrown truly is not unlike my own. I may be unto a demon, but you lot are no different. Very well! I recognize you, then, as having deviated from humanity’s path!”

Hina narrowed her emerald eyes, and her expression contorted in sadness.

Behind her, the Butcher tilted his head in puzzlement and stroked the area that was probably his jaw.

“The thing is, Ms. Lovely Maid…it would appear these enemies are demon worshippers. The means Madam Elisabeth has every reason to fight them, and to be honest, I can’t imagine there being the slightest chance they’ll best her… So even if a battle breaks out, it is what it is. Wouldn’t it be fine just to leave her to her devices?”

“No! Why, I could never do such a thing!”

Hina violently shook her head. She glared at the door.

His interest piqued, the Butcher let out a long exhale. His next question had a strange weight to it.

“Are those your feelings as an attendant speaking, perhaps?”

“That’s correct. Right now, I can’t leave her alone. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I did.”

Hina answered without a moment’s hesitation. The Butcher gave her a slight nod.

Meanwhile, Elisabeth spoke once more. Her voice rang out proud and true.

“And as such, this is a task well befitting the Torture Princess! For killing those who are unto demons is a task that belongs to those just as wretched!”

Even Hina knew.

Sometimes, the only thing that could kill evil was a different brand of evil. That was one of the world’s many truths. And yet—

—in Hina’s opinion, that was far too sad a truth—

—and at the same time, far too contradictory.

*

The automaton had some thoughts about the words of man.

What exactly was evil that killed evil?

The righteous would never have been able to reach that underground banquet. Would people praise someone who had been invited there and gone on a rampage, then? The answer was no. They would attack the person who reached the banquet and point fingers at them, all while singing the praises of righteousness.

And the Torture Princess wouldn’t even get mad at them. She’d laugh, saying that theirs was a natural reaction. But Hina also knew someone who would get mad at them, who’d rage at them with all his might. It was her beloved master—*Kaito Sena*.

You’re looking down on someone who got their hands dirty to slay evil while you got to keep yours clean?! he’d shout.

Righteousness is a difficult thing to pin down in this world and in every other. Everything can be right, and anything can be wrong. But…

…believing in your beloved’s words was what it meant to love someone.

Hina reached into her leather bag, a magic device that had no bottom, and pulled out a halberd longer than she was tall. She aimed its brutal blade at the door and launched a swing to break it open. The Butcher immediately let out a yelp.

“No, no, no, no, no, think it through! It’s dangerous to smash down the door all of a sudden! Why, you might well hamper Madam Elisabeth’s focus! Stand dooown!”

“How—very—right—you—are!”

Hina nodded. However, she was already far enough in her swing that stopping the halberd was no longer an option. In an unbelievable display of strength, she changed the blade’s course and cleaved through empty space. As the handle spun up into the air, Hina righted her stance.

Her silver hair rustled as she lowered her head.

“I’m very sorry. My composure was lacking. I offer you both my thanks and my apologies.”

“I must say, for you to be able to restore your posture from that position… You never fail to impress, Ms. Lovely Maid. Now then… It would be nice to find a key that could open this door quietly, or perhaps a different entrance we could use in order to take our enemies and just our enemies by surprise. And both would be even nicer still… *Glance*.”

The Butcher looked down at the driver, whose head was still resting on his lap. He rapped him on the cheek.

He landed several such strikes before the driver woke up. When the man realized what was going on, his expression froze. It was a reasonable reaction.

After all, anyone would react that way upon discovering that their head was in a mysterious, dark figure’s lap.

The man began to cry *Aaaah, a monster!* but was stopped; the Butcher spoke in a deep murmur.

“Heh-heh-heh. Be quiet, now, and we won’t have to hurt you.”

“Mr. Butcher, that sounds suspicious in a whole different way!”

“Ha-ha-ha. You say that, but you’re giving off a far more threatening vibe than I am… Now as for you, do you know of any key that can open the door from the outside, or perhaps of another way to get in?”

The driver blinked at the line of questioning. However, his eyes twitched to the side for a moment first. Hina’s preeminent automaton powers of observation allowed her to pick up on the change, and the Butcher caught it, too. Both of the things they were looking for existed.

However, the driver shook his head no. Apparently, he was planning on courageously keeping his master’s secrets. The man’s reaction caused the Butcher’s expression to change. It was still dark beneath his hood, but Hina could tell.

The Butcher was smiling.

“Mr.… Mr. Butcher?”

“Ah, such loyalty. Feeling responsibilities toward your post, fulfilling your duties as your master commands… It’s the mark of a good man, and a mark I can respect. So I take it this means you’re prepared to bear your share of the burden of your master’s sin?”

“…Hmm?”

The driver let out a muffled voice through the Butcher’s hand. The Butcher responded by slowly lifting his other arm. His claws gleamed as he laid them on the scruff of the driver’s neck and spoke in a strangely syrupy voice.

“Goodness, for you to so readily share the sin of whatever horrible ritual is going on in there… Hats off to your dedication, good sir.”

The driver started thrashing about, his eyes wide. He frantically tried to tell them something.

However, the Butcher pretended not to notice, instead digging his claws into the man's skin.

"Then I suppose I have no choice! I'm a proud Butcher, uninterested in matters that don't concern meat, but out of respect for your loyalty, I shall deliver the coup de grâce myself!"

"Agh, gack… No, stop, please!"

The driver threw the Butcher's hand off in utter desperation.

The Butcher stopped for a moment. Before he could say anything, the driver shouted out the information of his own accord.

"Th-the key is in the antechamber! And you can get into the observation balcony from there, too! If there's anything else you want to know, I'll tell you anything! Anything and everything! So please spare me, if no one else!"

The driver sobbed as he made his desperate entreaty. Then he even began denouncing his employer. "The banquets are horrible." "Those demons." "They're the worst." "They're like fat pigs, all of them."

The Butcher listened in silence to what the driver had to say. Eventually, he smiled once more within the darkness.

"I see……. So that was the limit of your resolve as an attendant, then."

"…Mr. Butcher?"

Hina let out a puzzled little murmur. The Butcher's words were clearly full of all sorts of complicated emotions. But as far as she knew, he himself wasn't anyone's attendant. Hina tilted her head to the side. However, she didn't have time to put that confusion into words.

All of a sudden, the Butcher's demeanor did a complete about-face, and he spoke in the same cheery voice as always.

"Now then, if you'd be so kind as to lead the way! Tallyho!"

The abrupt change appeared to strike even more fear into the driver. He nodded repeatedly, then practically took off at a dash. The Butcher tallyhoed on after him.

Hina clenched her halberd tight and hurried on to join him.

There was only one destination on her mind.

The Torture Princess's—Elisabeth's—side.

*

"The balcony is just past here."

The driver pointed at one section of the darkened tunnel. Now that he mentioned it, they could see a stairway hidden there. According to the driver, the organization didn't officially allow observers, as one of the requirements for taking part in the banquet was to become complicit. However, they were willing to waive that requirement for some of their wealthier financiers.

There was no small number of their older patrons who, while brutal in nature and filled with licentious appetites, lacked the willpower and physical resilience to partake in the banquets themselves. To accommodate

them, the organization had built a balcony that was far enough back so as not to dampen the enthusiasm of those down below.

That way, they could enjoy the bloody banquets to their hearts' content whenever they liked.

"Hmm. For a group of so-called demon worshippers, their business senses seem much more on point than their actual beliefs… Ah, I see you're in quite the hurry. Fare thee well, Ms. Lovely Maid."

The Butcher gave Hina a little wave as he watched her race down the stairs like a tempest given flesh.

The decorative carvings on the wall flitted into her peripheral vision one after another as she barreled past them. They featured a horned monster laughing as it ate people. They were impressive pieces of artwork, albeit in rather poor taste. The devout probably depicted what they imagined a demon to look like.

How completely absurd.

Hina found the whole thing exasperating. For she knew one thing—those images didn't even begin to compare to how horrifying actual demons were.

The pain they inflicted on people was beyond imagination. Admiring Diablo and its demons and altering them to make them more palatable to blindly believe in were both acts of utter ignorance.

No matter how much you change them to suit your fancy, God and Diablo will never be worth believing in.

No matter how many hordes of people praised and extolled them, Hina would never be able to bring herself to join the chorus.

In her mind, there was only one entity worthy of her faith.

It was Kaito Sena, her eternal lover. Him alone.

For that was what love was—madness and faith. And beyond that staircase waited the woman whom the man she believed in believed in himself. And that was why Hina was making such haste. Suddenly, the walls at her flanks ended.

Hina raced out onto the balcony.

A chandelier glittered beside it, and past the balcony, Hina could make out what was going on below.

She gasped. Or rather, she replicated the human gesture of gasping.

The lower level was red with blood.

In all likelihood, the scene that had just taken place was far grislier than any the rich financiers had ever witnessed from atop this balcony.

Now, though, the carnage was over, and the floor below was a sea of blood and viscera. Ravaged corpses were piled up like mounds of dirt. Many of them looked to have been slain by the Torture Princess without so much as a chance to fight back.

At long last, their crime had found its punishment.

However, there was someone down there who was still alive.

A young man with an ax leveled his blade at Elisabeth, squaring off against her with some sort of resolve burning in him. Elisabeth shrugged.

“You never took part in the banquet to begin with, so it’s not as though I’ve any intention of killing you.”

“Shut up! You…you’re no different than they were! How could you do something like this?!”

The man shouted, practically bellowing, and Elisabeth just shook her head.

Then in the same level tone as before, she went on.

“A question, then. Where was this foolhardy bravery of yours to be found when the girl was still alive?”

“I—I…”

“Why, if it’s the brutality you object to, you could have even made this stand of yours back when *they* were alive. So why now? What will this baying of yours accomplish? Whose pain will it heal? At this late hour, how —?”

“Be quiet! Shut up already, you monster! Yeah, you’re right. I regret it. I regret it, okay! This is what I should have done the moment I stepped into this damn room! I don’t know how long it’ll take me to atone for not doing so, but I’ll do whatever I have to!”

“I see. Well, I know not the scale of your resolve, but if it’s resolve you have, then I shan’t say any more.”

“But here and now, what I need to do is kill you! How am I supposed to move forward if I let a monster like you live?!”

Hina quietly listened as the youth raged. Elisabeth merely nodded. And Hina knew.

When a person met a monster, even if it posed no threat to them personally, it was still their duty to kill it.

Such was the fate of people and monsters. And yet…

“Such *is* the fate of people and monsters.”

As Hina whispered those words, the young man raised his ax up high. He charged at the Torture Princess. However, his movements were so slow, it was almost sad. One snap of her fingers was all it would have taken for Elisabeth to end things. However, she didn’t move a muscle.

The Torture Princess calmly returned the youth’s gaze. And Hina continued:

“But you, my lady, are no monster.”

Sometimes, the only thing that could kill evil was a different brand of evil. But in the end, only good could break that cycle of malice.

That, too, was one of the world’s many truths. The Torture Princess knew that fact well.

And anyone who knew that fact couldn’t possibly be a monster. She was just Elisabeth Le Fanu, and she was standing motionless.

The executioner’s ax drew ever closer.

“And I will never leave you alone.”

If the people of this world refused to see that, then it fell on those who didn’t fit that criterion to stay by her side.

Namely, a foreigner from another world and an automaton.

Hina practically pirouetted as she leaped off the balcony.

*

“That’s right. If this was all you saw of her, then that would be a perfectly reasonable conclusion to draw. After all, it is an undeniable truth.”

Her maid uniform fluttered as she descended straight down.

After that ghastly scene, it was impossible to deny the Torture Princess’s brutality. Even so, Hina’s feelings remained unchanged.

“…However, I refuse to let you call her a monster.”

The person whom her beloved admired, a woman whom she herself adored—

—was standing there with a forlorn look in her eyes.

What more reason could she possibly need?

Hina’s silver hair swayed as she gracefully made her landing. She swung her halberd and easily lopped off the head of the young man’s ax. Its blade went spinning through the air, eventually planting itself in corpses’ torsos.

Hina lifted her beautiful face and spoke without a moment’s hesitation.

“Never again utter such rudeness to my dearest Lady Elisabeth.”

“Wha…? I don’t—”

“And heeere I goooo! Hachaaaaaah!”

The young man began to let out a bewildered yelp, but he was cut off by a loud, cheerful cry.

At some point, the doorway had gotten thrown wide-open. The Butcher had used the key. Something large and heavy came hurtling through the entrance—the massive bone-in piece of meat that had put in so much work this day already.

After spinning through the air, it struck the young man square in the forehead. The youth keeled over backward, then went still. It looked like it had given him a concussion. Hina fixed her gaze on him.

His life didn’t appear to be in any danger. When he woke up, he would probably flee. Then he would report what had happened to the Church, and they would learn of Elisabeth’s brutal act. In the end, though, she’d successfully put down an equally brutal group of demon worshippers, so the Church would try to quietly put the matter to rest. Yet even so, the rumors would linger on.

Loathsome Elisabeth. Repulsive Elisabeth.

It was true. The punishment that the Torture Princess had handed down was a fate no person had the right to subject another to.

But at the same time, no more innocents would fall victim to these dark underground halls.

Each was just as true as the other. And because of that, Hina elected to gaze. She gazed straight at Elisabeth. Elisabeth, for her part, blinked repeatedly. This clearly wasn’t a turn of events she’d anticipated.

Eventually, Elisabeth spoke.

“Now hold on a minute… What are you two doing here?”

“One thing led to another, you see!”

“And we ended up tailing you!”

Choosing to omit some details, the two of them proudly puffed out their chests.

Elisabeth scratched her cheek as though unsure of what to say or do. And Hina and the Butcher both knew—even considering how slow he was moving, she could have easily countered the young man’s attack. However, whether or not she had actually needed help was beside the point. Hina simply refused to leave the Torture Princess alone.

Hina and Kaito had promised to stay by Elisabeth’s side, and it was their duty to follow through on that.

She silently addressed her eternal lover.

Isn’t that right, Master Kaito?!

She then cleared her throat, her chest puffed out all the while.

*

The carriage rattled along the dark night road.

Beside Hina sat Elisabeth, who’d been making a tense expression for some time. The only thing that broke the silence was the Butcher’s occasional cheers of “Heigh-ho!” Eventually, though, Elisabeth spoke in a quiet, stiff tone.

“…You’ve no objections, Hina?”

“About what, might I ask?”

“You saw the atrocities I committed back in that room. You ordered the man not to call me a monster, but…your master is Kaito, not I. There’s no need for you to flatter me. I’m appreciate your diligent service, don’t get me wrong, but you needn’t pretend to hold me in such regard.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Elisabeth, but please don’t misunderstand me.”

Hina immediately rejected Elisabeth’s premise, and Elisabeth turned back toward her so fast, it was like she’d been slapped in the face.

Hina returned her master’s master’s gaze and returned her stare. Her emerald eyes gleamed.

“I might not have a sense of morals the way humans do, but I am aware of how your past deeds and cruel nature have drawn hatred and criticism from many. I can’t refute what they say…but at the same time, it’s my right to choose who I want to protect, and who I want to hold dear.”

My heart is mine and mine alone.

Not even my beloved master can deny me that.

That was what Hina was saying. That was the one thing she refused to waver on. In fact, not even Kaito had the power to change her heart. Whenever he made a big decision, Hina would always think things over on her own first before making her choice.

That was the mark of her dignity. That was the mark of her pride. And that was the mark of her love.

Elisabeth had no answer for that. Instead, she just stared off into space and, eventually, curiously posed a question.

"…How utterly puzzling. What about me do you find so worthy of your admiration?"

"Hmhm, there are oh-so-many things… But the specifics are a secret. That's something you'll have to figure out for yourself someday, Lady Elisabeth. It wouldn't mean anything if I just told you."

Hina playfully raised a finger in front of her lips.

She and Kaito both adored Elisabeth. However, it was important that Elisabeth figure out for herself why that was. It was important for her to realize there were people who willingly stood alongside the Torture Princess in the hellish wasteland she'd created.

There was something the two of them had changed.

A truth that had seemed unshakable.

"Heigh-ho!" the Butcher cheered once more. Elisabeth let out a little murmur.

"You're a strict one, aren't you?"

"Oh yes! I may dote on Master Kaito, but even I know when it's time for some tough love!"

Hina puffed up her chest with pride. It wasn't good to spoil people, so at times, even love required a strict hand.

Elisabeth shook her head as though to admit defeat. At long last, the first genuine smile she'd worn that day spread across her face. Hina loved it dearly when Elisabeth made that expression. She thought it was very becoming.

Then Elisabeth whispered to her.

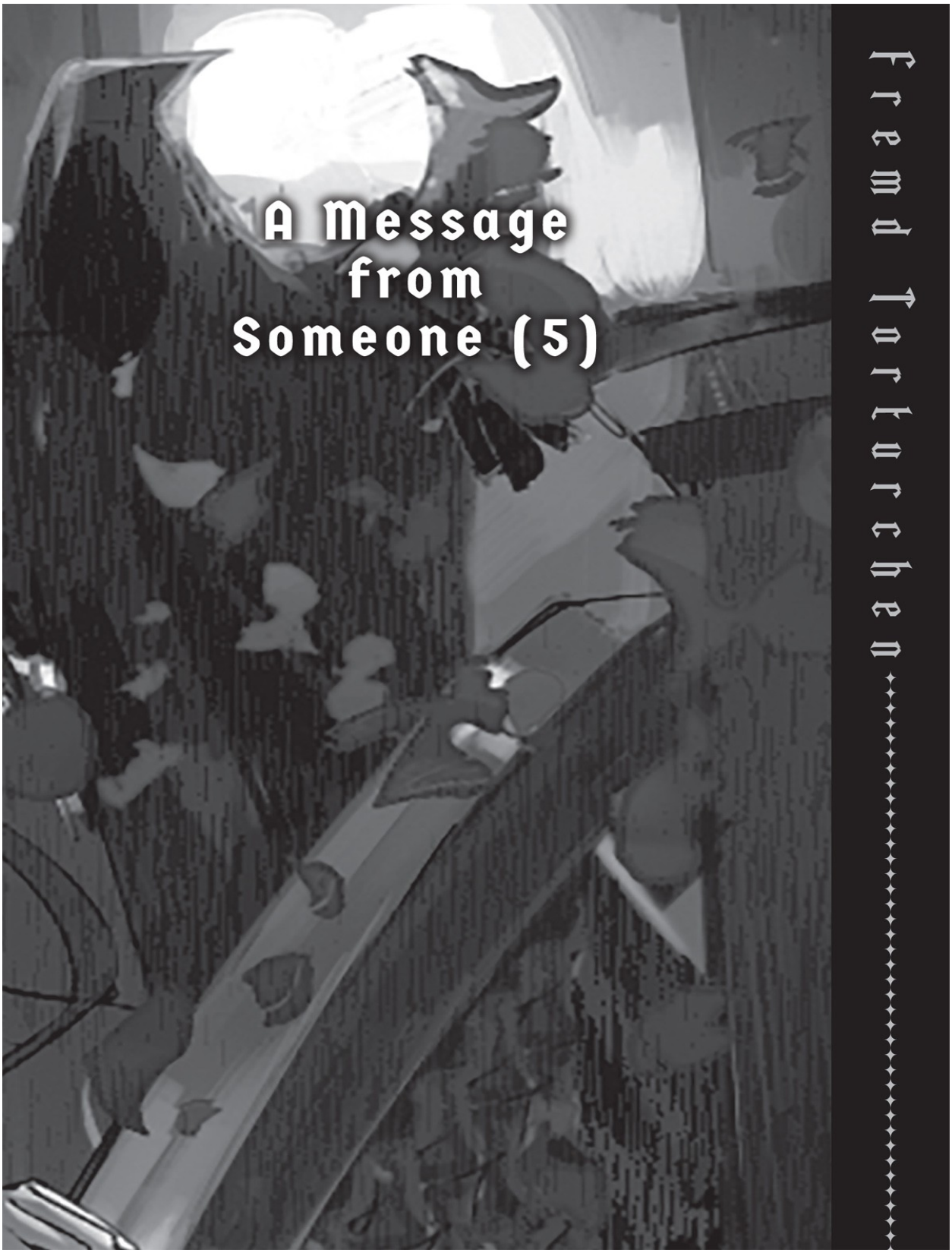
"You know, in the interest of avoiding a large hassle, what say we—?"

"Keep this all a secret from Master Kaito? Oh, of course."

They exchanged a glance, and with that, their girls' promise was official. A moment later, they both broke out into laughter.

Another strange "Heigh-ho!" echoed through the air as the carriage rattled beneath the dawn sky.

And back at the castle, Hina's favorite person in the whole world was still sleeping soundly.


A Message
from
Someone (5)

A Message from Someone (5)

To begin with. To begin with, to begin with, to begin with. Let's begin with basic premises.

What am "I"?

To begin with?

Even if I asked you, I doubt you would have a good answer. I'm not even sure I do, so there's no good reason for you to. Or wait, do I have it all backward? Do you understand what "I" am better than I do? It's certainly possible.

After all, the world is full of stories about "me," every one of them dressed up with pomp and flair.

It's as though my own life were a fairy tale.

A beautiful myth, adorned with a gorgeous bouquet of lies.

How utterly absurd. How completely obnoxious.

I don't want to be glorified, I have no desire to be revered or worshipped, and I certainly don't think you should put your faith in me. After all, what good will your prayers do? I have no way to reply and wouldn't have anything to say even if I did.

In short, what I'm trying to say is this.

Fuck off.

Why should you people get to erase the fact that I was myself?

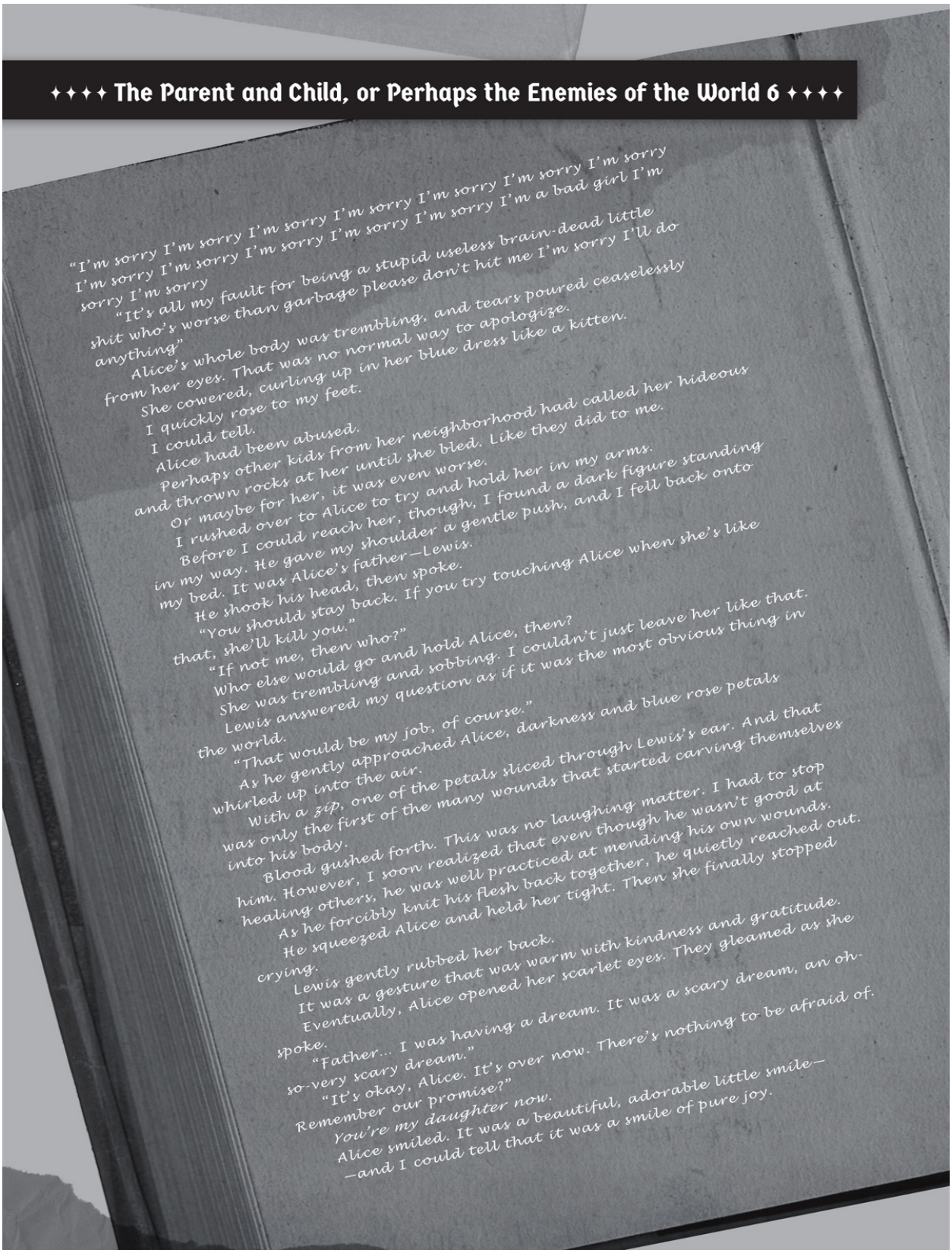
Why should I let the sin I shouldered get stolen and painted over with pretty words?

But you see, this is where I stop being so sure of myself. Are these thoughts simply the product of madness? Or would someone of sound mind have arrived at them as well?

In truth, I don't much care either way. There's just… There's this acute feeling I have in the bottom of my heart.

Why was it me?

Why wasn't it you?



✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 6 ✦✦✦✦

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm a bad girl I'm sorry I'm sorry

"It's all my fault for being a stupid useless brain-dead little shit who's worse than garbage please don't hit me I'm sorry I'll do anything"

Alice's whole body was trembling, and tears poured ceaselessly from her eyes. That was no normal way to apologize.

She cowered, curling up in her blue dress like a kitten.

I quickly rose to my feet.

I could tell.

Alice had been abused.

Perhaps other kids from her neighborhood had called her hideous and thrown rocks at her until she bled. Like they did to me.

Or maybe for her, it was even worse.

I rushed over to Alice to try and hold her in my arms.

Before I could reach her, though, I found a dark figure standing in my way. He gave my shoulder a gentle push, and I fell back onto my bed. It was Alice's father—Lewis.

He shook his head, then spoke.

"You should stay back. If you try touching Alice when she's like that, she'll kill you."

"If not me, then who?"

Who else would go and hold Alice, then?

She was trembling and sobbing. I couldn't just leave her like that.

Lewis answered my question as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"That would be my job, of course."

As he gently approached Alice, darkness and blue rose petals whirled up into the air.

With a *zip*, one of the petals sliced through Lewis's ear. And that was only the first of the many wounds that started carving themselves into his body.

Blood gushed forth. This was no laughing matter. I had to stop him. However, I soon realized that even though he wasn't good at healing others, he was well practiced at mending his own wounds.

As he forcibly knit his flesh back together, he quietly reached out. He squeezed Alice and held her tight. Then she finally stopped crying.

Lewis gently rubbed her back.

It was a gesture that was warm with kindness and gratitude.

Eventually, Alice opened her scarlet eyes. They gleamed as she spoke.

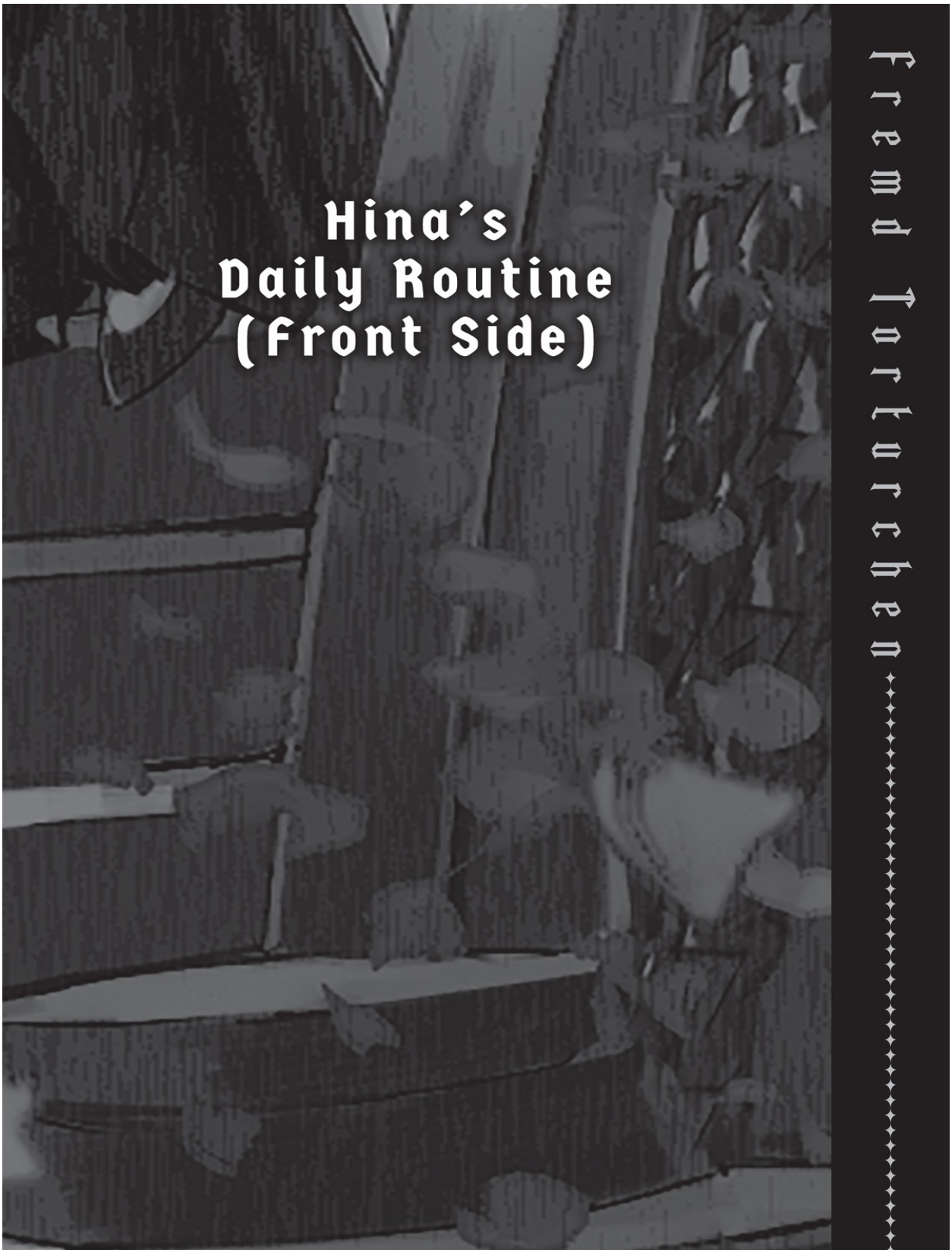
"Father... I was having a dream. It was a scary dream, an oh-so-very scary dream."

"It's okay, Alice. It's over now. There's nothing to be afraid of. Remember our promise?"

You're my daughter now.

Alice smiled. It was a beautiful, adorable little smile—

—and I could tell that it was a smile of pure joy.


Hina's
Daily Routine
(Front Side)

✦✦✦✦ Hina's Diary 1

Overcast, nice and warm, no battles against demons.

Today, I was working in the garden. The weeds had gotten out of hand, so it was a little bit of an ordeal getting them all up by the roots.

Even so, I would have been able to handle it just fine on my own, but Master Kaito showed up partway through to help out!

(Such kindness! How very like! Master Kaito!)

Why, I was so overjoyed that I accidentally let a little steam leak out of my ears.

Then when night came around, the moon was looking especially lovely, so we had a little drinking party in the throne room at the request of Lady Elisabeth. All my new side dishes were well received, although I do wish we had some more cold vegetables that I could have included.

The two of them remain in good spirits, and today was another wonderfully peaceful day!

Today's menu ..... *Apple cider and beef-tripe stew, creamed shrimp with calf thymus, pickled grape salad, blancmange, and various hot and cold sides*

Lady Elisabeth's reaction ..... *"Brilliant as always, Hina!" (Words I am hardly deserving of.)*

Today's Master Kaito ..... *Today, as always, Master Kaito continued being the coolest, loveliest, kindest, most gallant, most beautiful, most merciful, and most wonderful man conceivable, with none his equal in Heaven or on the earth!*

Today's Master Kaito 2 ..... *When Master Kaito gets startled by this world's bugs, he becomes loveliness incarnate!*

I pray that we'll be able to spend tomorrow and the day after like this as well!

Drizzly, a little brisk, no battles against demons.

Today, I conducted an inspection of the underground area. The teleportation circle was in tip-top shape, and none of the traps were activating when they weren't supposed to.

However, I discovered that one of the rooms that had been listed as *empty* was actually being used to store grain. And just as I feared, the place was home to a large rat infestation. Perhaps due to the preservation magic that had been cast on the grain, each of the rats had grown to the size of a human baby. Oh my!

As a result, we ended up having a rather heated battle.

I'm just thankful that I found the critters before Master Kaito ended up running into one of them.

After night fell, I encountered Lady Elisabeth sneakily grilling some meat again. I promised her I would keep it a secret, so I didn't tell Master Kaito.

Instead, I quickly whipped up some of my special sauce, much to her delight.

Mr. Butcher says he loves it when she says how delicious she finds things, and I must say, I agree wholeheartedly.

Today's menu ..... Calf-heart fricassee with a carrot sauté, white organ-sausage gratin, warm tomato-and-vegetable soup, and some apple-skin gelatin for dessert. And a secret midnight snack!

Lady Elisabeth's reaction ... "Meat eaten secretly in the dead of night is sumptuous as it is, but when you get involved, it gets more delicious still!" (Her delight is the greatest thanks I could ask for.)

Today's Master Kaito ..... Today, as always, Master Kaito continued being the coolest, loveliest, kindest, most gallant, most beautiful, most merciful, and most wonderful man imaginable! If there was a competition between every master in the world, he would take first place in a landslide!

Today's Master Kaito 2.... When Master Kaito mumbles "I'm stuffed—I can't eat another bite" in his sleep, he becomes the very symbol of happiness.

Today's Master Kaito 3.... The image of Master Kaito in profile while he washes dishes is a treasure that quite frankly deserves to be framed.

I pray that this daily routine of ours will continue on tomorrow and the day after and the day after that!

Hina’s Daily Routine (Front Side)

“So Hina left these diary entries behind before she vanished, huh?”

“What even is a ‘daily routine’?”

It all happened one evening, a short while after the Grand Governor was trounced; Hina and Elisabeth swapped outfits and roles to kill some time, and the group got wrapped up in an incident involving a curse. All the chaos had died down, and life at the castle was peaceful once more.

Or so they thought, until a new incident reared its ugly head.

Kaito Sena and Elisabeth sat facing each other, their expressions clouded with worry.

Sitting them between was a single book with the words *Hina’s Diary* written on its cover.

Things had all begun a few hours prior, just after dinner.

*

“Hiiinaaa.”

“Oi, Hina, where are you?”

At the time, Kaito and Elisabeth were both looking for Hina, albeit for different reasons.

Kaito’s motive was that he needed to confirm the number of spare bottles of wine they had in stock. Elisabeth, on the other hand, just wanted to cajole Hina into making her a midnight snack. However, Kaito couldn’t find her in her room, nor could Elisabeth find her in the kitchen.

At that point, though, both of them had yet to realize just how serious the situation really was.

The two of them each casually wandered about and checked the places they thought she might be. The route she patrolled at the night, the pantries she might be reorganizing, even the spirit-filled reservoir.

But no matter where they looked, Hina was nowhere to be found.

“Huh? Where’d she go? Hiiinaaa, where aaare you?”

“Hmm. Not here, either? Hina, where did you wander off to?”

As the two of them called out to her, they bumped into each other. And the moment they did, they realized something.

Something had probably happened.

That mutual hunch of theirs was soon proven. No matter how long the night waned on, Hina never showed up.

They exchanged a glance.

Not only could they not find her, but Hina also had automaton-level hearing. The fact that she hadn't come bounding over like a loyal hound the moment Kaito started calling for her was strange in and of itself.

They crossed their arms and headed for the throne room. Elisabeth plopped herself down on the throne.

After crossing her fair legs up high, she gave her final verdict with a grim expression on her face.

"'Twould seem we've no choice but to consider the chance that she's gotten herself wrapped up in some sort of trouble."

"Don't tell me a demon broke in…"

Kaito's expression froze. There was precedent for that, as Elisabeth's castle had once found itself under attack by the Knight's beast.

He didn't want to consider the possibility, but he couldn't deny that it existed. However, Elisabeth shook her head no.

"'Tis too early to make assumptions. Remember that curse that befell us the other day? Not every foe that makes its way into this castle is a demon."

"Y'know…I really do feel like you should do something about this place's defenses."

"'Tis intentional, you fool. I leave the defenses shoddy to lure in demons. I will admit that it's the mark of a third-rate master to expose her servants to undue danger, but…spiriting Hina away without a trace is a task that would daunt even the Grand King, highest ranked of the remaining demons. Even if demons were to attack, I imagine we'd lose you at worst."

"I mean, I'd appreciate it if you put a *little* effort into keeping me alive. Anyway, if this isn't a demon attack, then what is it?"

"I haven't the faintest… The worst-case scenario is that she was subjected to some manner of curse or suggestion and left on her own. But if that's the case, then any technique that could control her with such precision would have required some time to take hold. We'll need to examine the actions she took over the past few days."

"Yeah… I really hope that isn't what happened, though."

"All we can do is believe. At present, we have but one fact we know for certain."

Elisabeth rested her chin on her finger. Her crimson eyes gleamed as she made her quiet declaration.

"Trouble's fell scent is in the air."

And with that, the story wrapped back around to the start.

*

Currently, Kaito and Elisabeth were in Hina's room.

The two of them were sitting cross-legged on the floor and going through Hina's diary. After reading the entry from the day prior, Elisabeth snapped the book shut. She crossed her arms with a guilty expression on her face.

“Hmm, nothing that particularly strikes me as odd.”

“So *you’re* the reason the meat keeps going missing at night.”

“Let’s not dwell on that. It’s not important right now.”

“Huh, and when did she have a chance to hear me sleep-talking?”

Kaito cocked his head to the side in confusion as he thought back over the passage in question. According to Hina, he had said, *“I’m stuffed—I can’t eat another bite,”* but he had no idea when that might have been. Elisabeth blinked.

“Hmm? When she was pressing her ear against your bedroom door that morning, as she does every day. When else?”

“Wait, hold up.”

A piece of information he would have been happier not knowing had just been mercilessly added to his brain.

Kaito squeezed his temples. Elisabeth tilted her head with a quizzical expression on her face.

“Hmm? Oh, did you not know? She presses herself against it so firmly, and you never once complained, so I’d just assumed it was all consensual.”

“That makes it sound like some sorta weird kink thing! I’m telling you, I had no idea! Eugh…”

Kaito looked up at the ceiling in lament. He crossed his arms and sank into thought.

After thinking it over for a while, he let out a quiet murmur.

“…What does she find enjoyable about that?”

“Oh heavens, I haven’t the faintest. Nor do I suspect I wish to.”

Elisabeth followed him in crossing her arms in thought. Now they had another useless riddle on their hands. However, this was hardly the time to be worrying about it. All of a sudden, Elisabeth rose to her feet and returned Hina’s diary to her desk.

“Anyhow, none of the entries here seem suspicious. ’Twould seem there weren’t any hints inside.”

Kaito nodded. He’d expressed qualms about looking at Hina’s diary without permission, but Elisabeth had informed him that Hina let her read it from time to time anyway. It was nice that the two of them got along in spite of their professional relationship. Unfortunately, though, the diary hadn’t given them any clues into their current missing-person problem.

Hina’s strong. But that’s what makes this so worrying.

“’Tis too early to give up hope, Kaito. Let’s retrace the steps she took today.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Yeah, let’s do that!”

Elisabeth strode off, proactive as always. Worried as he was, Kaito gave her plan his enthusiastic endorsement. If worse came to worst, they might at least find traces of any magic that got used. Kaito stood up.

And with that, the two of them left the room and set off in search of leads on Hina’s current location.

*

There was nothing to be found in front of the door to Kaito's bedroom, nor did they have any luck in the surrounding hallways.

After checking them, they headed to the next place that Hina stopped by in the mornings. Namely, the kitchen.

When they got there, Elisabeth proudly puffed out her chest.

"Each and every morning, Hina brews me the finest cup of tea, you know! See, unlike a certain *someone*, she knows what it means to be considerate! You could stand to learn a thing or two from her, Kaito!"

"Oh yeah, Hina's great; I'm with you there. But you do realize that if I tried doing the same thing, I'd end up with a cup of toxic sludge, right?"

"…'Tis a mystery to me how your cooking skills remain so singularly catastrophic."

"You're one to talk, with that poison cooking of yours and all."

"You know, if we weren't in the middle of an investigation right now, you'd be meeting a brutal end for that comment."

As she spoke of bloody murder, Elisabeth headed to the white cupboard and threw its doors open.

Inside sat Hina's collection of tea leaves, seeds, and dried flower petals—all of which were sourced from far and wide and arranged into neat little rows. The lowest shelf was home to the silver spoon, small dish, and mortar that made up her mixing set.

Each morning, Hina would carefully consider the ambient temperature and humidity that day to come up with the perfect blend.

Elisabeth circled the cupboard, looking it over from top to bottom. Kaito did likewise.

This was where Hina did much of her work—not just in the morning, but in the afternoon and evening, too. However, they couldn't find anything out of order in the cupboard or its surroundings. They then gave the rest of the kitchen a thorough once-over and, upon doing so, discovered that it was completely spick-and-span.

Not so much as a single knife was out of place. Elisabeth nodded in admiration.

"Hina's efforts really do exude excellence, don't they?"

"Yeah, you can say that again."

As her beloved master and her master's master, it filled their hearts with pride. However, this was no time to be getting sentimental. The two of them quickly hurried out of the kitchen.

This time, they headed for the stairs.

*

"Why, Hina even cleaned the stairs throughout the castle today! Yet another display of magnificent thoughtfulness!"

“Yeah, she said dust was starting to build up in the corners. For the record, I did help her out.”

“And you accomplished but a fraction of what she did, no doubt. The difference between your work and hers is as vast as the distance between Heaven and… Hold that thought.”

“What’s up?”

“Now that I say it, something dawns on me. ‘Throughout the castle’?”

Elisabeth massaged her temples. Kaito nodded—he knew exactly what she meant. Not only was the castle gigantic, but in keeping with its fortresslike exterior, its layout was also complex and unintuitive. Elisabeth’s face turned a little pale.

“I-in short, we, too, have no choice but to climb and descend its entire godforsaken span?”

“H-hey, at least we’re just looking around; it’s not like we have to clean it or anything!”

Kaito gave his response enthusiastically, but after thinking it over a little, he, too, came to appreciate how daunting the task before them was. As his mind swam, he recalled the interaction he’d had with Hina earlier that day.

At the time, it was midafternoon, and the hem of Hina’s maid uniform was swaying back and forth in the most adorable way as she diligently swept her broom to and fro.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho, my meats are the finest meats around! Filled with love and bravery, they’ll never let you down! Eat them and your courage will increase a millionfold! As always, I’m your friendly neighborhood Butcher! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! And I am Master Kaito’s maid!”

While she briskly cleaned the stairs, Hina was also singing, and her revised version of the Butcher’s peculiar song echoed through the halls.

Each time she finished clearing a given step of its dust and cobwebs, she would hop down to the next step in turn without wasting so much as a single movement. It gave her work an almost rhythmic flow to it. Impressed, Kaito walked over to her. She immediately turned around.

When she spotted him, her face lit up like a puppy whose owner had just returned home.

In fact, Kaito could practically envision a little tail wagging back and forth behind her.

“Oh my! I sing Master Kaito’s name, and here he is before me! Surely, this must be destiny!”

“I dunno if I’d go quite that far.”

“In fact, I have half a mind to hold a wedding ceremony right here and now, but when I think about it, I suppose I’m already your eternal companion. Yee! …Ahem. Forgive me, Master Kaito, I let my excitement get the better of me. Is there something you needed me for?”

“Nah, I was actually just wondering if you wanted me to lend a hand.”

“Goodness me! Why, that’s so kind, I could just swoon! I would be overjoyed to have you help!”

In spite of the snarky quip it had been preceded by, Kaito’s offer caused Hina’s face to flush with glee. She was an automaton, so it was unclear if she actually needed the help, but she was clearly delighted by his consideration regardless of its efficacy.

Hina smiled happily. Bliss practically radiated from her expression.

Upon remembering that smile of hers, Kaito clapped himself on the cheeks. When he spoke, it was with renewed motivation.

“And besides, we gotta do what we gotta do! Remember, this is for Hina!”

“Right you are! For Hina’s sake, no task is too onerous!”

Kaito and Elisabeth gave each other a firm nod.

Then they took off at a run.

*

How did things go after that?

Well, for all his enthusiasm, Kaito ended up being largely useless. Without a supplementary source of mana, his stamina quickly ran out, so despite verbally lambasting him as being a weak-kneed coward, Elisabeth ultimately had to cover the majority of the stairs herself.

In the end, though, their investigation came up empty-handed.

They did receive a scare when they found traces of mana-rich blood on the first floor of the main western stairwell, but they quickly realized that it was just Kaito’s from when he keeled over in exhaustion. “Don’t go leaving red herrings!” Elisabeth cried as she clapped him on the head. And there was something else they discovered as well. It was about the leftmost stairwell in the servant quarters, the one Hina had assigned Kaito to clean. After investigating the castle’s staircases, they discovered that out of all of them, that one was both the shortest in length and had the widest steps, meaning it was by far the easiest one to clean.

“…Man, I’m so tired that I can’t even move, and even so, I can feel Hina’s love.”

“…You’re surrounded by it constantly. You should be feeling it all the time, you dunce.”

During their quarrel, the two of them were both sprawled out on the hallway floor. Kaito idly gazed at the ceiling.

The light streaming in through the stained-glass windows was as creepily ominous as ever. He let out a dull murmur.

“Elisabeeeth.”

“Whaaat?”

“You really should remodel those, y’know.”

“I share the sentiment, but they’re so high up, ’twould be a right royal pain.”

“Yeah, I feel you.”

Both of them sounded like their brains weren’t getting enough oxygen.

Before they even noticed, they got deeper into the night. Normally, this would be the perfect time to start drinking. However, they still hadn’t found Hina yet. The two of them racked their exhausted brains for ideas.

“…Man, I wonder where Hina went.”

“Well, we did cover the whole castle without turning up so much as a single trace of her. It seems rather unlikely it was any sort of curse or suggestion. No mage, no matter how skilled, could have pulled such a stunt off so cleanly.”

The good news was, that meant it was less likely that Hina was in any immediate danger. Even if they hadn’t learned anything else, that alone was reward enough for their trials. Kaito breathed a sigh of relief. If that was the case, though, then where had Hina gone?

Why did she vanish?

Kaito and Elisabeth furrowed their brows.

“Hey, Elisabeth. Are there any other possibilities that come to mind?”

“At the moment, the most likely one seems to be that Hina left the castle of her own volition.”

“What, without telling either of us?”

“Hmm. No, perhaps not.”

The mystery only grew deeper. Another silence descended on them, and they each closed their eyes and thought. Their bodies were hot from running all over, and the hallway floor was cold against their skin.

Right when the two of them had just started cooling down, though, Elisabeth’s eyes shot open. She sat up with a start.

“Wait just one minute!”

“Forget waiting—I wasn’t even moving.”

“Precisely! No, not precisely.”

Elisabeth lay back down, then used her arms to lift her body off the floor and rose to her feet with movements reminiscent of a clockwork doll. She pointed her finger at Kaito, who was still lying on the floor.

“I found it! Something strange!”

*

And with that, they returned to the starting point.

Namely, Hina’s room. Elisabeth strode over to the desk and retrieved Hina’s diary from between the desk’s bookends. Then she flipped it open to the final entry and pointed at the passage in question.

“Here!”

“Uh… You mean this bit? ‘However, I discovered that one of the rooms that had been listed as empty was actually being used to store grain. And just as I feared, the place was home to a large rat infestation. Perhaps due to the preservation magic that had been cast on the grain, each of the rats had grown to the size of a human baby. Oh my! As a result, we ended up having a rather heated battle.’”

“I often cast magic on grain to preserve it for long periods, then forget that I did so or that it was even there in the first place!”

“I feel like that’s the sorta thing you should try to remember.”

“But see, even eating it would never cause rats to grow as large as babies!”

“Say what?”

Kaito stared at Elisabeth blankly. Being from another world, that was all news to him.

He couldn’t help but glance back and forth between her face and the passage.

“Wait, that clearly means something weird is going on! How could you not notice that?!”

“No, well, they do grow *fairly* large, so I just overlooked it. But still, I’ve never once heard of them growing to the size of babies. Now that I think on it, these rats could well be someone’s familiars.”

Kaito’s face went pale. If Hina ran into someone’s familiars and got into a fight with them, there was a very real chance she was in danger. He and Elisabeth had inspected the stairwell leading underground and the main corridor at its bottom when they were searching the castle, of course, but there were still a lot of rooms in its branching, labyrinthine hallways that they hadn’t checked yet. Elisabeth snapped the diary shut with a stern expression on her face.

They exchange a pair of grave murmurs.

“So the place we should head to…”

“Aye, ’tis the basement.”

After returning the diary to its desk, the two of them set off, throwing the door to Hina’s room wide-open as they strode through it.

Then they broke into a run. Their destination: the basement corridors.

*

The basement corridors were dark, stank of rust, and were constantly filled with a noise that resembled a low moan.

On top of that, they had been constructed in an obtuse, winding manner. Setting foot in them without proper preparation was just asking to die lost and alone. However, Kaito’s life experiences had left him with a particular ability—he could remember anything perfectly as long as his memory of it was accompanied by pain. Thanks to the time he got Elisabeth to carve a map of the key areas in his flesh, he knew those spots like the back of his hand. However, there was a limit to that map’s scope.

And unfortunately, he wasn’t familiar with the place that Hina had written about.

“So, you have any idea where this ‘room that was listed as empty but was actually being used to store grain’ is?”

“…About that. I haven’t the faintest.”

“Don’t you own this place?”

Kaito frowned. If Elisabeth didn't know where it was, then they were at an impasse. Elisabeth impatiently glanced from left to right and back again. After painstakingly racking her brain, she let out a shout.

"Well, you can hardly blame me! This is *me* we're talking about, remember—the person who shoved the grain into some random room, forgot about it, and listed the room on the map as *unused* in the first place! Why, it would be contradictory if I *did* remember where it was!"

"You don't have to get so defensive, geez! It's not like I'd get anywhere by pointing fingers… So, uhhh, I guess our only option is to figure out which rooms you listed as *empty*, exclude the ones I remember, and go check all the others."

"Aye. If we've other options, I certainly can't think of them."

Elisabeth readily nodded. It was a boring plan, and labor-intensive at that.

However, this was no time to be losing heart.

Hina does so much for us; this is the least we can do for her.

And with that, the two of them began their search of the basement.

*

As they walked through the cold and the dim that permeated the basement hallways, their footsteps echoed in a manner that was downright unsettling.

Although there were magic lights dotting the walls, the night down there was far deeper and darker than it was aboveground, and the shadows lurking in the nooks and corners seemed to defy any attempt at illumination. Elisabeth trembled just like she had the last time they found themselves wandering about down there.

"Urgh, how do I describe it…? As always, this place is disagreeably disquieting. It plays on a person's childhood scars in a way demons can only dream of… Not that I'm afraid in the slightest, mind you!"

"…I still can't get over how much being down here bothers you."

"Don't you take that tone with me! Why, I've half a mind to subject you to the same ghost stories that Marianne and that wretched uncle of mine so gleefully tormented me with in my youth!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say," Kaito listlessly replied as he took the lead and strode on. The two of them turned away from the main hallway, which led to the teleportation circle, and headed even deeper into the basement. Eventually, they reached an area that was predominantly filled with storerooms. It was dead quiet there. Just like Hina had reported, none of the traps were turning on when they weren't supposed to. However, that only served to accentuate the basement's gloom. Elisabeth trembled even harder, a fact that Kaito found downright astounding.

"Seriously, what gives? How is it you can fight such horrifying enemies without even flinching, then get freaked out by your own basement? Actual

real-life monsters *have* to be scarier than stuff from made-up stories, don't they?"

"…Our grim tale begins just after a young bride meets a most untimely death."

"Wait, hey, no, I don't wanna hear this."

Apparently, Elisabeth intended to make good on her threat. The darkness of their surroundings did a perfect job of setting the mood, and Kaito couldn't help but break out into a cold sweat. Elisabeth ignored his pleas and went on.

"The nightmare first took root in the manor's exquisite flower garden. Before anyone noticed, the rosebushes underwent a horrible change."

"Elisabeth, man, you gotta cut it out—I'm not kidding around… Huh?"

Suddenly, Kaito arched his brow. The bend in the hallway in front of him was almost completely cloaked in darkness, but he felt as though he could make out something writhing within. When he realized what it was, his eyes went wide.

"Wait, what?"

Just around the corner, there was a thick tangle of bizarre, undulating ivy.

In fact, it almost resembled the plant from the ghost story that Elisabeth was telling him. He frantically yanked at her arm.

"E-Elisabeth! Elisabeth!"

"*The first tragic victim was the gardener…* What is it now, Kaito? We're just getting to the good part. At least let me get through the first night before you… Ah!"

When Elisabeth caught sight of the aberration, she froze in place. The moment she did, Kaito realized something.

This was bad news.

Maybe getting Elisabeth's attention was a mistake. However, hindsight was twenty-twenty. He hurled himself backward, and without a moment's warning, Elisabeth let out a yell.

"Death Rain!"

"I knew it!"

A surge of jet-black miasma and crimson flower petals whirled through the air, and red-hot lead began raining down from within it.

The mysterious plant found itself completely dashed by molten metal, and Kaito had to frantically scurry around to avoid getting splashed.

Then they heard a horrible "*Screeeee!*"

Apparently, there had been something under the strange vegetation.

Kaito turned back to look at it, then tilted his head. There were large piles of clay lying on the floor. However, he didn't see any collapsed walls or anything, so it seemed odd for there to be so much clay in the closed-off underground basement. But he didn't have time to ponder the mystery for long. The lead had started loudly cooling and hardening around the ivy, and

a writhing swarm of something else entirely had emerged from beneath it. Kaito desperately tried to keep his cool and hold his ground.

He squinted at the swarm to try and identify what it was composed of. Then he finally came to a realization.

“It’s some sort of weird plant…and a swarm of giant rats!”

“Hmm? But why? There were no rats in the ghost stories I was told.”

“Those never had anything to do with anything!”

As Kaito let out his exasperated bellow, the rats continued crawling over their comrades’ corpses and advancing toward the two of them.

Their size was just as Hina had reported it. They were about as large as human babies.

The bigger problem, though, was just how damn many of them there were.

The rats’ noses twitched as Kaito and Elisabeth became the new targets of their single-minded hunger. The creatures seemed absolutely ravenous.

As far as Kaito was concerned, this was far more terrifying than the ghost story had been. To Elisabeth, though, they didn’t even register as things to be feared. She immediately regained her usual composure.

Then she clapped her hands together.

“I see, I see! I’ve cracked all the mysteries!”

“Wait, you figured it out? You know whose familiars they are or whatever?”

“No, no, these are no familiars! They’re normal rats, born and raised!”

“They’re *what*?!”

“Even if they ate magically preserved grain, rats would never grow to this size! But take a gander over there!”

Elisabeth pointed toward the rats’ feet. Kaito was confused, but he squinted in that direction regardless. There, he saw the odd pile of clay from before, the one that seemed so out of place. Now he realized that pile was where the ivy had sprouted from.

Elisabeth puffed her chest up with pride.

“That, right there, is the remains of a golem—likely one that got too old and broke down of its own accord!”

“Oh, huh. You store unused golems down here, too? …No, you don’t. You were just running it ragged until it up and died on you. Isn’t that dangerous? C’mon, you gotta keep a better eye on your stuff.”

“Yes, yes, many apologies, so sorry! Anyhow, when the rats were carrying the grain back to their nest, one of them must have dropped some in the golem’s clay remains, and the mana stored in the golem caused the seeds to germinate. The rats weren’t just feasting on the mana from the grain, but from the golem as well—that’s why they grew so large!”

“Ohhh… Wait, hold on a minute.”

If that was the case, then that put them all the way back at the beginning. Just as they’d originally concluded, there wasn’t, nor had there ever been, an intruder.

So where had Hina gone?

But right when Kaito was about to ask that, Elisabeth looked up with a start. She strained her ears.

“Hmm, hmm… Hmm… Hmm?”

“C’mon, Elisabeth, listen to me when I’m talking to you. Hina is—”

“There’s something behind the rats…and it’s moving? I have a bad feeling about this. Fall back!”

“Huh? Hwah!”

Elisabeth grabbed Kaito by the collar, then fled with him in tow.

In the blink of an eye, they rounded the previous corner they’d turned. Elisabeth came to an abrupt stop. She crouched down with the wall to her back and dumped Kaito on the floor beside her.

The rats chittered as they drew ever closer, and the ivy rustled along with them.

Suddenly, both those noises were drowned out by a bizarre, intense *FSHHHHHHHHHHHHHH*.

“…Huh? What?”

“Good going, me. Call me forgetful if you will, but my intuition is as sharp as ever.”

Elisabeth nodded proudly. Some wispy smoke flowed over from around the corner.

It would seem that the noise had been from some sort of vapor billowing out. Kaito and Elisabeth were fortunate enough to have avoided a direct hit, but that wasn’t enough to save them from being assailed by its horrid, pungent odor. They frantically covered their mouths.

Still holding her breath, Elisabeth snapped her fingers. A whirl of black darkness and crimson flower petals coalesced, then began rapidly spinning to blow the vapor away. Luckily, that was enough to thin out the smoke.

The two of them cautiously rose to their feet and slowly made their way across the corridor.

They peeked out around the corner where the rats just were.

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

And what they saw there—

—was some sort of bizarre life-form.

*

“…It’s a space alien.”

“The hell is a space alien?”

Elisabeth reacted to Kaito’s dumbfounded murmur with a frown. She wasn’t familiar with the term. Unfortunately, though, Kaito couldn’t think of any other way to describe it.

After all, the entity before them was clad from head to toe in silver.

It was even holding some sort of copper tublike implement in its hands. It was bizarre, even by space-alien standards. Communicating with it probably wouldn't be possible. Kaito was at a loss for what to do.

Then all of a sudden, it popped its head off. Beautiful silver hair flowed out and landed atop the entity's shoulders.

"Wha—?!"

"Oh?"

Kaito and Elisabeth's eyes went wide.

Then they cried out in unison.

""Hina!""

"Phew, that should finally be all of them… Oh? Why, if it isn't my beloved Master Kaito and my dearest Lady Elisabeth! Whatever brings you down here?"

""THAT'S WHAT WE WANT TO AAAAAAASK!""

The two of them were relieved, but that wasn't going to stop them from shouting. Hina blinked her emerald eyes in puzzlement.

Still dressed like an extraterrestrial, she cocked her head to the side. At that point, Kaito elaborated:

"You went missing, so Elisabeth and I have been looking everywhere for you."

"For me? Oh goodness, I'm ever so sorry. It was all part of my work for the day, and I figured I would be done in no time, so I didn't think I needed to tell you, but…could it be that it's much later than I think it is? Eek, oh no! I got so wrapped up in mixing that I lost track of the time! However can I possibly apologize?"

Hina gave a hurried bow. However, Elisabeth told her that all was well.

"A-as long as you're safe, then there's no harm done. Come now, raise your head."

Kaito felt he should say something as well, but his attention kept getting drawn to what Hina was holding. Inside her copper tub, there was some sort of dark-green liquid sloshing about with a number of half-dissolved plants in it. He tried to peer inside.

The moment he did, though, Hina quickly hid the tub behind her back and shook her head.

"There isn't much left, but it's still emitting vapor! It's dangerous to stick your head in!"

"Hina…what exactly *is* that?"

"A secret mixture for exterminating rats, passed down since time immemorial, that I had stored in my Self-Recording Device! Or to be more precise, a special Murder Supreme Version of it that I came up with!"

"'Murder Supreme Version,' huh…?"

That certainly had a scary ring to it. By the sound of it, the rats didn't stand a chance.

And given that that's what she was holding, it was easy to surmise the rest of the story.

Hina must have gone back for a rematch with the rats. More than a little embarrassed, she bashfully told them the details.

“You see, I ran into one of their survivors when I was making my evening rounds. After that, I was able to discover that their main diet wasn’t actually the grain, but the plant growing here, and that their nest was tucked away behind it. From there, I went into the basement storage area and retrieved my ingredients and an outfit to safely handle them with…”

“Goodness, I had no idea we even had such things stored in the castle.”

“Wasn’t I *just* telling you to keep a better eye on your stuff?”

“Then once I was done mixing the treatment chemicals, I evaded the swarm, put the tub in their nest, and finished them off by adding an herb in to release poison smoke! If the unthinkable happened and a rat that large were to bite one of you, why, I wouldn’t have been able to rest until I killed every last rat in the world!”

Hina clenched her fist tight, and the other two nodded in understanding. With that, all the mysteries were finally solved—why Hina had vanished, why they hadn’t been able to find her, and why there hadn’t been any traces of her. Everything was clear now.

In short, there hadn’t been any reason to worry in the first place.

The fact that they were currently embroiled in a series of battles against the demons notwithstanding, it was certainly possible that they had let their imaginations run a little too wild. It would probably have been smarter to at least wait until the next day before sounding the alarm.

But right as Kaito and Elisabeth were about to start reflecting on their actions, Hina gave them a big, bright smile like a flower coming into full bloom.

“I really am sorry about the inconvenience, but thank you both so much. Knowing that my beloved Master Kaito and my dearest Lady Elisabeth were worried for my sake, why…it makes me feel more blessed than I could possibly dream of!”

Overcome with emotion, she blinked happy tears from her emerald eyes. Kaito and Elisabeth couldn’t help but scratch their cheeks.

Then they puffed up their chests like what they’d done was the most natural thing in the world.

✦✦✦✦ Hina's Diary 3

Overcast, nice and warm, no battles against demons.

Today, I cleaned the stairs some more. The dust and cobwebs had built up quite a lot, so I really do need to be more diligent about making sure that doesn't happen.

As I was working, what do you know, Master Kaito showed up to help again! (Oh, what a compassionate man he is!) That alone would have been enough to make me ecstatic, but something even more incredible happened later in the day!

At night, I had to go take on the rats again. Missing their nest was a failure on my part, and one I don't intend to repeat. I got myself fired up and dived into battle.

Much to my chagrin, though, it ended up taking far more time than I intended.

And then! I could hardly believe it! But Master Kaito and Lady Elisabeth! Came looking! For me! Such indescribable kindnessssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!

Why, my gears could have stopped for good that moment, and I would have died happy. As an automaton, being treasured in such a way is the greatest happiness I could possibly ask for.

I don't know how I can repay this blessing other than continuing to work like I always have.

The two of them remain unbelievably compassionate, and today was another wonderful, delightful, splendid day!

Today's menu ..... Pig's feet and foie gras baked in foil, steamed calf liver with special dressing, grilled vegetable salad, hearty mushroom soup, and rose mousse

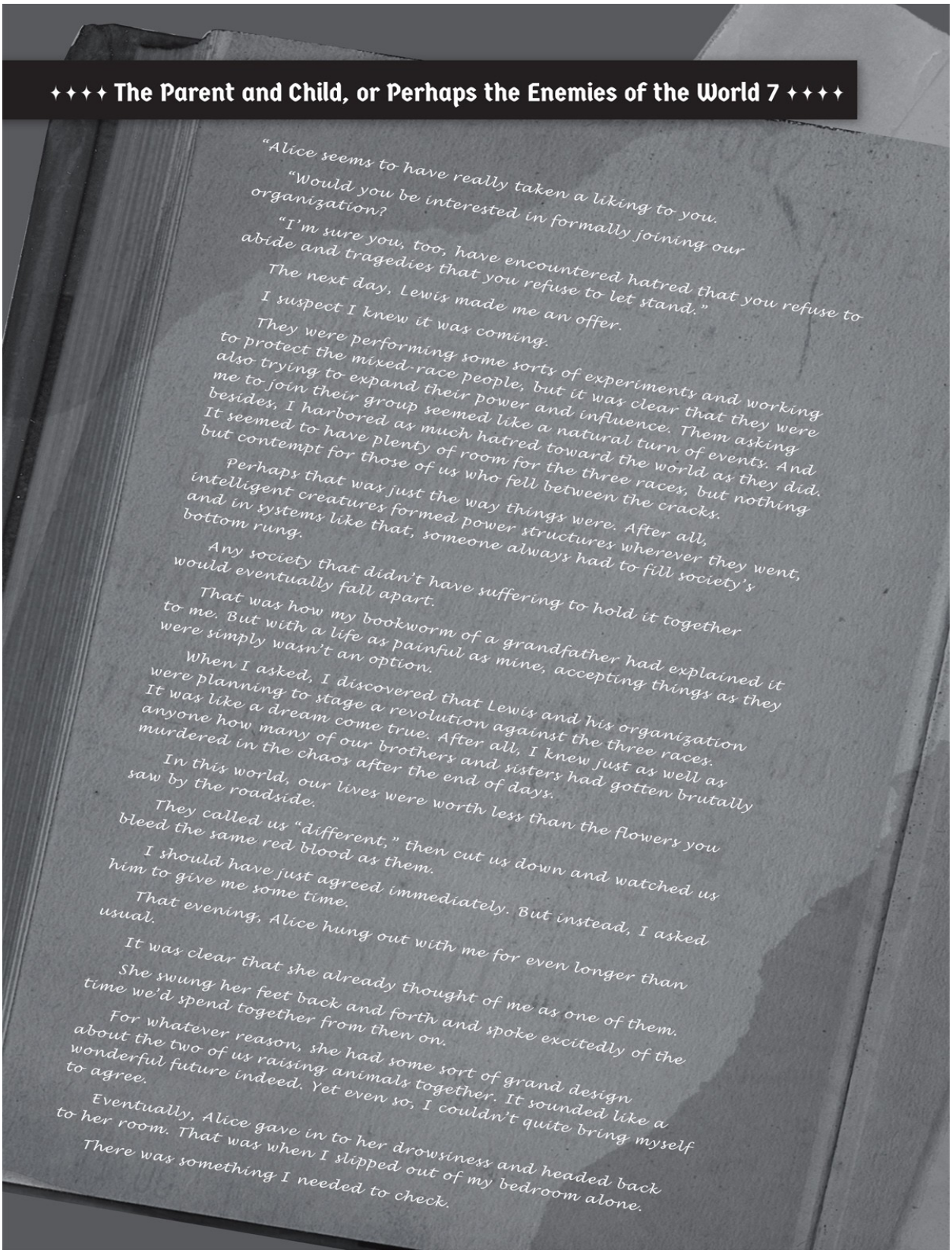
Lady Elisabeth's reaction ... "Wonderful as always, Hina!" (Words I am deeply grateful for.)

Today's Master Kaito ..... Today, as always, Master Kaito continued being the manliest, coolest, loveliest, kindest, most merciful, most gallant, and most beautiful man alive! May all the world kneel prostrate before him!

Today's Master Kaito 2.... When I think of Master Kaito coming to find me, the only word I can think of is destiny.

My beloved Master Kaito, my dearest Lady Elisabeth, thank you both so much.

I pray that the three of us will be able to spend days like this together for a long, long, looooooooooooooooooong time to come!



✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 7 ✦✦✦✦

"Alice seems to have really taken a liking to you.

"Would you be interested in formally joining our organization?

"I'm sure you, too, have encountered hatred that you refuse to abide and tragedies that you refuse to let stand."

The next day, Lewis made me an offer.

I suspect I knew it was coming.

They were performing some sorts of experiments and working to protect the mixed-race people, but it was clear that they were also trying to expand their power and influence. Them asking me to join their group seemed like a natural turn of events. And besides, I harbored as much hatred toward the world as they did. It seemed to have plenty of room for the three races, but nothing but contempt for those of us who fell between the cracks.

Perhaps that was just the way things were. After all, intelligent creatures formed power structures wherever they went, and in systems like that, someone always had to fill society's bottom rung.

Any society that didn't have suffering to hold it together would eventually fall apart.

That was how my bookworm of a grandfather had explained it to me. But with a life as painful as mine, accepting things as they were simply wasn't an option.

When I asked, I discovered that Lewis and his organization were planning to stage a revolution against the three races. It was like a dream come true. After all, I knew just as well as anyone how many of our brothers and sisters had gotten brutally murdered in the chaos after the end of days.

In this world, our lives were worth less than the flowers you saw by the roadside.

They called us "different," then cut us down and watched us bleed the same red blood as them.

I should have just agreed immediately. But instead, I asked him to give me some time.

That evening, Alice hung out with me for even longer than usual.

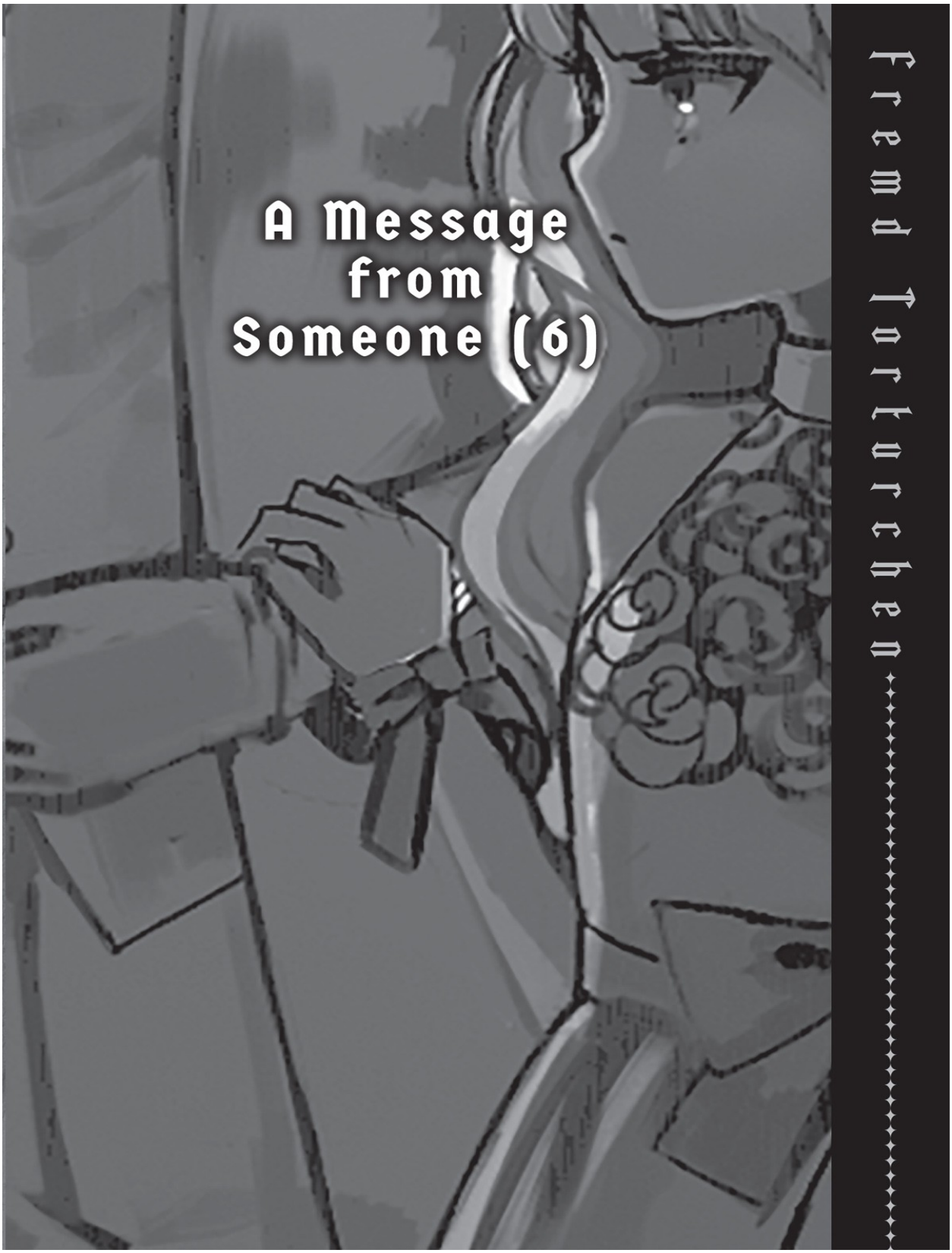
It was clear that she already thought of me as one of them.

She swung her feet back and forth and spoke excitedly of the time we'd spend together from then on.

For whatever reason, she had some sort of grand design about the two of us raising animals together. It sounded like a wonderful future indeed. Yet even so, I couldn't quite bring myself to agree.

Eventually, Alice gave in to her drowsiness and headed back to her room. That was when I slipped out of my bedroom alone.

There was something I needed to check.


A Message from Someone (6)

A Message from Someone (6)

That’s right—why was it me?

Why wasn’t it you?

Why me? Why was I the only one who had to endure this? If I think back, there was no real reason why I should have had to do all the things I did. All the stories they tell about “me” are far removed from the truth, so really, it should have just been someone who fit that idealized mold from the start.

So why the hell did it have to be me?

Why not you?

You still live free of care in this fragile world I reconstructed, don’t you?

Yet you know nothing of the truth. Nothing of the facts. You just guzzled down the faith they laid in front of you like a pig at a trough, didn’t you?

That’s right—flocks of sheep *are* fundamentally stupid. And that *is* the way things ought to be. Honestly, you probably don’t think I have any right to blame you. But that self-indulgence of yours is a sin unto itself, and because of it, you never even tried to notice.

Surely, the grace period I gave you was long enough.

Yet even so, you were unable to learn.

Stupid sheep. Fattened swine. I keep sending you these messages, but you never reply. Is my voice even reaching you?

…Because if it is, if you can hear me, then *surely*, you’re putting in a commensurate amount of effort trying to respond, aren’t you?

Don’t tell me you didn’t try at all, did you? Surely, surely, *surely* that isn’t the case.

Fine, then. Fine. If no one will listen to my message, then so be it.

But if that’s the case, then…I curse you. A curse on you.

A curse on you.

A curse on everything—

—and a curse on you.

✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 8 ✦✦✦✦

I'm afraid there's simply no way I can write about all the things I saw down there.

For the deepest part of the underground cemetery was overflowing with horrors, every one of them more vulgar, more horrifying, and more wrong than even the sea of carcasses I saw not long before.

For one, there were the wombs.

The wombs were round and horribly bloated. Sacks of flesh, stretched taut, smooth, and sleek.

However, they were more than just sacks.

Each one had a little navel resting on its peak, and they were just barely covered in living skin.

In other words, they were people, and what's more, they were alive. Some of the wombs were female. Some were male. But they were all just flesh. And it was all utter sacrilege.

Amniotic fluid pooled around my feet as I gazed at the placentas in utter disbelief. I let out a dumbfounded murmur.

"...How can someone do something like this?"

The sight before my eyes was in gross violation of every scrap of innate moral fiber in my body.

They were twitching and writhing. They were still alive.

Some of them were also suspended in midair.

Perhaps they were undergoing some sort of inspection, as each one of them had a large number written on their belly.

Their limbs squirmed helplessly about in the air. And I could tell.

The experiment that was taking place there was downright demonic.

My hosts sought revolution, but it wasn't the type that the word normally conveyed.

No, it was something closer to the end of days. They were going to tear society up by its very roots, and they didn't care how many people they would have to kill to do it.

But if they did, there would never be a happy ending waiting for us at the finish line.

No good could possibly come of using those things to overthrow the world.

And there was no way Lewis didn't realize that, either. So why?

"Oh, dear. You found them, Mr. White Rabbit."

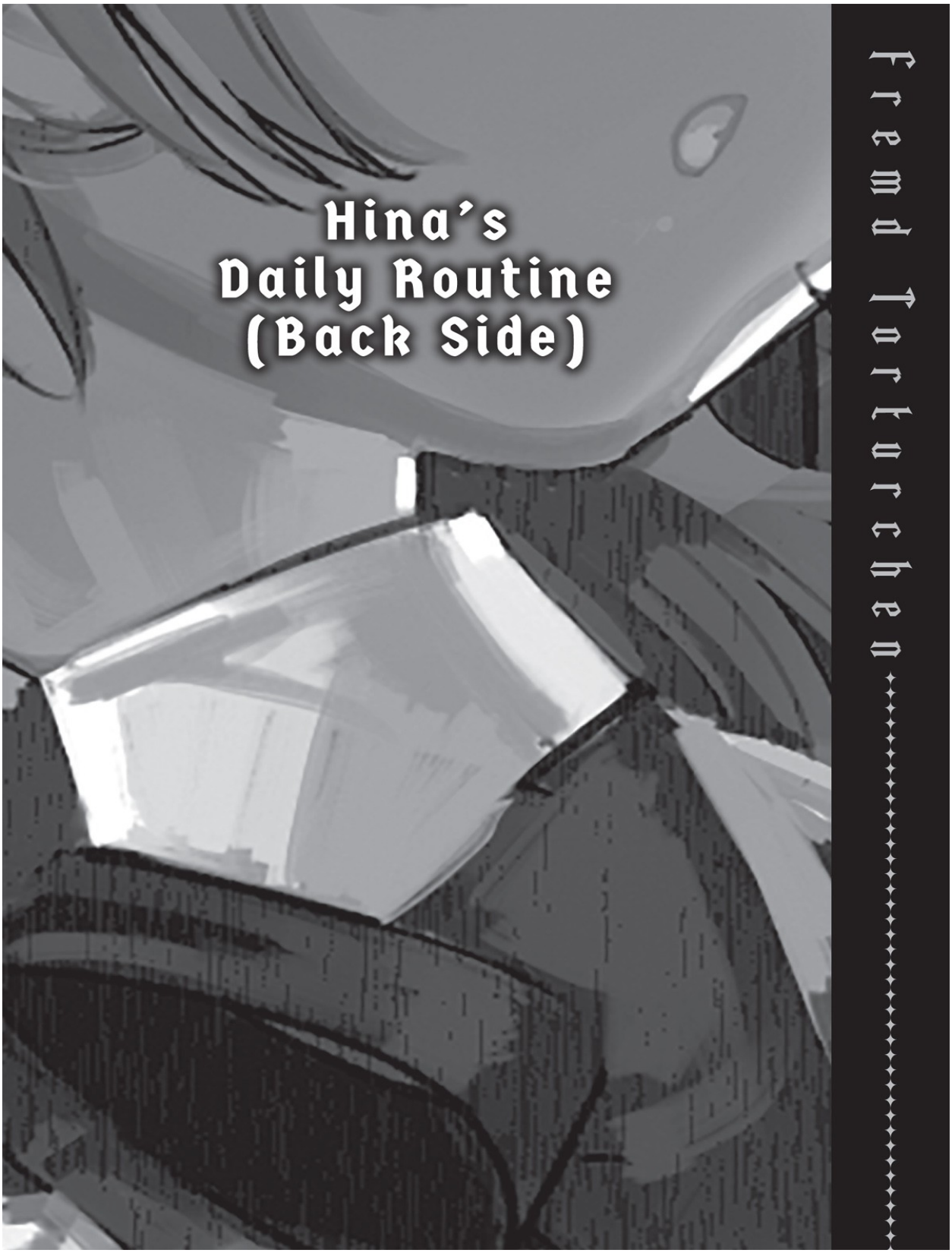
I heard a quiet voice. I turned. And just like once before, Alice was standing amid the horrors.

She gazed at me with a forlorn look in her eyes.

I felt goose bumps run down my spine.

She slowly raised her hand. But before she could, I grabbed her by the shoulder and yelled:

"Alice, we have to get out of here!"



Fremd Torturchen

Hina’s Daily Routine (Back Side)

“I understand, I really do—you all have your peace, just as we have ours.”

An earnest voice could be heard in the dim light. It echoed against the walls, gradually growing deeper and heavier before eventually fading into nothing.

The speaker—Hina—fixed her emerald eyes straight ahead of her. She was squaring off against a foe.

“However, your peace is in danger of encroaching on the lives of my beloved and my dearest.”

It was rare for Hina to take such a tone with her adversaries. Normally, she made no efforts to conceal her hostility and scorn. However, her current conduct was an exception to that, and for good reason.

Chance encounter though it was, it wasn’t her first rodeo with this particular foe. It was a rematch.

Hina had defeated them once before. In fact, she thought she had stamped them out. After all, there was a marked gap between her capabilities and theirs. She was powerful; they were weak. And yet even so, they had escaped annihilation and concealed a fair number of survivors from her. Given her overwhelming advantage over them, that in itself was a form of defeat for her.

The mere fact that a rematch was necessary had earned them a fair bit of her respect.

“Prepare yourselves—for it is my duty to end your lives until none of you remain.”

With that declaration, Hina made her intentions known to the enemy forces once more. The darkness before her wriggled and squirmed, and cries that were filled with a mixture of bloodlust and primitive animal fear cut through the air. Hina nodded in satisfaction.

It looked like their second bout was going to be just as heated as the first.

Hina adjusted her grip on the instrument of death she was holding. This time, though, it wasn’t her usual halberd.

It was a copper tub filled to the brim with rat poison.

“Now then, have at you!”

And with that, Hina charged alone into the massive swarm of rats.

As an aside, she wasn’t wearing her standard maid outfit, either. Instead, she had on a silver outfit that was cylindrical at the torso and wide at the arms and legs. It somewhat defied comprehension, although to put it in terms from Kaito’s world, it looked sort of like a space suit.

Her stout legs went *thump, thump, thump* as she raced down the corridor.

It was a sight that begged the question: How did things even get to that point?

Answering that, though, would require going back a few hours before the final showdown began.

*

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho, oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

After serving dinner, Hina happily sang a little song.

And why wouldn’t she be happy? The day had been lovely in so many ways. Kaito had helped her clean the stairs, and Elisabeth had complimented her cooking. She was filled with the kind of joy that could only be expressed through song.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho, my meats are the finest meats around! Filled with love and bravery, they’ll never let you down! Eat them and your courage will increase a millionfold! As always, I’m your friendly neighborhood Butcher! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! And I am Master Kaito’s maid and lover! Eep!”

Even though she was the one singing, she bashfully covered her face anyway.

She had been able to spend yet another day working for the people she loved, and just thinking about that fact filled her with joy and pep. The group was smack-dab in the middle of their prolonged battle against the demons, but as far as Hina was concerned, these were the happiest days imaginable. For there was something she knew.

She was, without a doubt, truly fortunate.

The automatons Vlad built as presents—Hina’s sisters—couldn’t feel strong emotions. Yet even so, if they saw how she was being treated, it wouldn’t be odd for them to feel driven to tear her limb from limb.

She was just that blessed.

Carefully crafted automatons like her could sometimes develop emotions and rich minds of their own, depending on how they were used. It blurred the line between her and actual humans. However, this world had magic, so there was something of a surplus of entities with minds of their own.

There were familiars, spirits, mythical beasts, and even summoned souls like Kaito, and all of them were frequently used as servants.

In a world like this, the thought of automatons having human rights was absolutely laughable.

As a general rule, things created using magic were viewed as nothing but tools for their users. That was just a commonly accepted fact.

However, Hina’s two masters treasured her like she was an actual human girl. For starters, both of them were kind people. Also, in Kaito’s case, he was from another world, and for Elisabeth, she probably just didn’t pay the matter much thought.

Neither of them realized what they were doing, but from Hina's perspective, the way they treated her was a blessing she could never have even dreamed of.

To her, being able to work for their benefit was the ultimate form of bliss.

The only way it could possibly be better was if her eternal lover, Kaito, would let her dote on him to her heart's content.

"*Sigh*, Master Kaito was the coolest today, just like he always is… The way he ties up his hair into a little knot is so lovely, I could just lick him all over and smooch him until the cows come home… All right, it looks as though I've finished making the rounds. What should I do now? I wonder if Lady Elisabeth wants to play some cards or some chess, or perhaps even do some drinking…"

It had been cloudy that afternoon, so although things could go either way, there was definitely a risk it could rain. Depending on the weather, they might have to pick somewhere different to hold their evening activities. Hina headed over to one of the windows lining the hallway to see how things looked.

"_____!"

Suddenly, she sensed a presence. She whirled back around on the spot.

At present, Elisabeth and her servants—Hina included—were locked in battle against the fourteen demons. No matter what else she was doing, Hina never let down her guard. Even if, by some turn of fate, she had been sloppily making out with Kaito, she would still have been vigilantly attuning herself to her surroundings. Thanks to that, her reaction was swift.

She reached into her magic leather bag, pulled out her halberd, and brandished it menacingly.

"Who goes there?!"

However, Hina's shout was met with silence. Instead, some sort of figure dashed behind the sword-wielding suit of armor stationed at the bend in the hallway. It made its way down the stairs as fast as it could.

Hina shifted her center of gravity down low, then took off at a dash, pursuing the target of her suspicion like a beast on the hunt.

Down at the landing, the figure she saw earlier joined up with another, similar entity. The newcomer was holding a biscuit tight in its mouth. Kaito or Elisabeth must have dropped it while they were snacking on it.

The figures were each about the size of a human baby.

…No. It can't be!

When Hina realized what they were, she was shocked.

And if she hadn't been sure enough before, the next noise she heard sealed the deal.

Squeak!

The two of them descended down into the basement. For a moment, Hina stopped in her tracks.

She squeezed the handle of her halberd tight. A few tense words escaped her lips.

"…I see there were survivors."

Not only was that wholly unexpected, but also, to her, it was proof of a grave failing on her part.

For to a servant like her, rats were her natural enemy.

*

Unfortunately—

—the castle's custodian had no patience whatsoever for dust, bugs, cobwebs, weeds, or rats.

Whenever she found them, dead or alive, she would fight to the bitter end to ensure they were completely purged from the castle's halls.

For example, there was the valiant battle she'd fought the day prior.

As part of her task for the day, Hina went down to the basement. There were no problems with the teleportation circle, and all the traps were responding properly. But in one of the basement's rarely used rooms, she discovered that there was something strange going on.

The records listed the room as *empty*, yet inside, it was full of grain.

As a result, a rat infestation had taken root there, and to make matters worse, the preservation magic cast on the grain had resulted in a problematic side effect. Thanks to its power, the rats had grown to be as large as human babies.

When Hina fought them, it was a fierce affair indeed.

In the end, though, she managed to trounce them with ease, albeit with her legs a little more gnawed on than before. She knew that dumping their bodies in the forest ran the risk of disturbing the ecosystem, so she instead buried them out by the rear garden. Was it coldhearted of her? Perhaps. But the world was a coldhearted place.

At that point, though, she got complacent and made the incorrect assumption that the battle was over. And that was a grave error.

Some of the rats had survived. And where there were two survivors, there were probably two hundred more out of sight.

"Oh dear… It would appear I've made a blunder. This time, I must be sure to finish them off before my beloved Master Kaito or my dearest Lady Elisabeth runs into them!"

Hina clenched her fists tight. The thing was, her beloved Kaito dwelled in a golem body. In theory, it was immortal, but not even he would survive being eaten alive. In that regard, a huge swarm of giant rats was like his natural predator. And as for Elisabeth, the rats themselves didn't pose a threat to her, but if they scared her badly enough, there was a chance she would end up bringing the whole castle down just to kill them.

Hina needed to settle this alone, and as quickly as possible.

Before she descended the stairs leading into the basement, she massaged her temples and thought her options over.

I remember the room where I faced the rats yesterday, and I think it's safe to assume their nest is somewhere near it. Now, if I head to that room and that room, I should be able to find…

Hina searched her memory for all the bits and pieces she needed. Each time she walked through the castle's labyrinthine basement, she added the route she took to the ever-expanding map of the area that she kept stored in her brain with astonishing accuracy. She even recorded the contents of every room she visited.

She would need materials for this rematch, and she knew just where to find them. It was unclear how many survivors there were, but it was essential that she wipe them out completely this time.

Now certain of her path, Hina snapped her eyes back open.

"All right, this will work! I was the one who made the mistake, so it's time for me to make things right!"

After rallying her spirit, she stowed her halberd in her leather bag and daintily lifted the hem of her maid outfit. Then she gracefully descended the stairs. Her silver hair swayed as she vanished into the gloom.

Incidentally, this was around the same time that Kaito and Elisabeth started looking for her to check the wine-bottle count and coax her into making a midnight snack, respectively. However, there was no way Hina could have known that.

Down in the basement, not even her beloved master's voice could reach her.

Undeterred, Hina began running through the underground corridors.

*

Her first mission was to figure out where their nest was.

To do that, she headed for the grain storeroom where their previous battle took place. To get to the present, you had to start with the past. At the moment, their old battleground was devoid of rats, but Hina didn't let that discourage her. Not faltering or panicking in the slightest, she pulled a block of strong-smelling cheese out of her leather bag, tore off fragrant little chunks, and placed them throughout the hallway. Cheese might seem like an odd thing to carry around, but she liked to have some on hand so Kaito or Elisabeth would have something to eat if the situation called for it.

Then she concealed her presence and waited.

When she really put her mind to it, Hina could even silence the cogwheels inside herself and truly act the part of an object. Before long, a single rat appeared. Not noticing her, it took the cheese in its mouth and happily scurried off.

Hina followed behind it with silent footsteps. After tracking it for a little while, she arrived a corner and made a sudden stop.

She peeked around it. There was something writhing around the bend. Upon further inspection, she discovered that it was some sort of strange, rapidly growing ivy.

It would seem that the rats weren't her only enemies. Hina carefully surveyed the surroundings.

In doing so, she finally realized what had driven the rats' irregular growth.

There were several large piles of clay scattered all over the hallway floor, which was odd, given that she was underground. They were where the ivy had taken root. Considering the golem, the rats, and the grain seeds, the answer was as clear as day.

"I see… It all started when one of them dropped some seeds it was carrying. And I suspect that their nest is inside it."

Ever since the ivy grew around their nest, the rats had been enjoying its blessing. It made for the perfect defensive wall. However, now Hina knew where they lived. Her task was set.

Hina nodded. The method she had in mind should end up getting rid of the ivy, too. This wasn't a problem.

"Now then… Let's get this started, shall we?"

Her emerald eyes flashed as she shifted her battle plan into its second phase.

Little did she know, though, that things were only going to get harder from there.

*

"Hmmm. It really is kind of old, isn't it?"

Hina crossed her arms.

She was in another storeroom that had been listed as *empty* on her maps. Several jars sat before her, all of which she'd pulled down from the crumbling shelf embedded in the wall. At a glance, they looked like antique bottles of wine, but they were actually chemicals infused with mana. However, these weren't the kinds of fancy chemicals that professional mages used in their research. They were just minor household supplies, like pesticides and herbicides. It wasn't exactly a trivial task, but by going to Mage's Row in the Capital and getting a membership card, which demonstrated that one understood enough about magic to know how dangerous they could be, even members of the general public could get their hands on such chemicals. However, it was unlikely that anywhere but Elisabeth's castle had them stocked in such variety or quantities. It was a complete mystery as to why she'd bought so much.

In all likelihood, though, she'd probably had a small bug problem at some point, freaked out, and completely overreacted.

Later, Hina had taken it upon herself to draw strangely adorable skull marks on the lids of each one. That way, nobody would accidentally mistake

them for wine. It was a more legitimate concern than one might think, as Elisabeth was secretly a giant klutz.

It really is such a charming feature of hers… That aside, though, we have a problem.

After mentally reaffirming how adorable her master was, Hina sank back into thought.

She stared at the box of herbs and the two types of bottles she'd picked out.

"It's as I feared. They've grown too deteriorated."

At the moment, Hina's plan was to concoct a powerful rodenticide.

She was using a recipe listed in her Self-Recording Device; these instruction had been passed down since time immemorial by traveling mages who used it when they visited small villages stricken by plagues. The process involved combining two kinds of simple cleaning chemicals, then tossing in an herb that would release poisonous fumes to kill the vermin. The problem, though, was that the chemicals had weakened with age.

"Well, no sense in standing around worrying about it. Let's at least see how it looks."

Hina ripped the oil-paper lid off one of the bottles. Even just doing that was enough for her to tell how half-hearted the bottles' supposedly airtight seals had been. She frowned, then poured a drop on her finger and placed it atop her tongue. It was a special automaton technique for testing such things.

For a moment, she closed her eyes. Then when the analysis was complete, she nodded.

"Yes, just as I thought. I can't really expect these to have much of an effect at all."

The chemical had lost almost all its mana, and its composition had badly degraded. As a result, the toxin's effect on the rats would be much lower in turn. There was no way such an inferior poison would be enough to take down those massive rodents.

Hmm. Hina closed her eyes and thought.

One option was to simply head back upstairs. From there, she could get in contact with the Butcher and order fresh chemicals. However, that would mean leaving Kaito and Elisabeth to coexist with the rats while she waited for the chemicals to arrive. In Hina's mind, that was a complete nonstarter. Why, she was Kaito's eternal lover, his faithful companion, his soldier, his weapon, his love outlet, his sex doll, and his maid.

She refused to expose her lover to so much as the faintest possibility of harm. And she refused to allow rats a place by her masters' sides as well. She had her pride, after all.

"That's right. I can't give up now; it's simply not an option."

She clenched her fists in determination. Running away with her tail between her legs would be a disgrace on her name as a servant. As a good wife, and as a proper maid, she didn't have the option of giving up.

“It’s all right, though. I have a plan. The only thing I need to do is follow my master’s example.”

Hina placed her hands, overlapping one over the other, atop her sizable chest. She closed her eyes as though in prayer.

Then she spoke in a voice brimming with faith and affection.

“That’s right—it’s time to emulate Lady Elisabeth, poison-cooking extraordinaire!”

Hina was completely serious, by the way. Her words were intended as a sincere compliment. If Elisabeth herself had heard her, though, she would have let out a shriek like an avian cryptid and sent Kaito flying with a ferocious kick. *Why MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE?!* he’d have cried as he spun through the air. Fortunately, however, no such victim emerged here.

Hina nodded vigorously and reached for a new bottle.

“Luckily for me, I’m an automaton, and poison has no effect on me! Thanks to that, I can make my concoction with the Lady Elisabeth Method: ‘Throw random things in the dish as the mood strikes me’!”

Then she grabbed the large copper tub from the bottommost crumbling shelf.

Just as originally planned, she dumped the two chemicals into it. After taking the now-empty bottles and tossing them on the ground helter-skelter, she immediately reached out and grabbed more bottles. She steeled her resolve.

“All right, let’s do this! Time to make an even stronger rat poison—the Hina’s special Murder Supreme Version!”

And with that, she announced the start of her horrific experiment.

*

A centipede tried to flee from a crack in the wall, but it died before it could travel far. Several spiders plopped down from the ceiling. Not one of them was still alive.

Hina let out a cry of delight at the successful completion of her slightly deranged experiment.

“I-it’s finished! I knew the Lady Elisabeth Method would do the trick! Now I’ve successfully defended my honor as Master Kaito’s maid! *Pant, pant*, oh, Master Kaito, how I wish I could lick you and smooch you and nibble your adorable face!”

Her cheeks flushed scarlet. Before her, the surface of the completed brew burbled and gleamed in a most unnatural way. At first, it was purple, then red. For a moment, it faded into a dull gray, before then shifting into an array of rainbow hues. For whatever reason, it ultimately settled on a deep, dark green. The whole process defied explanation.

At least the color it ended up as was a fairly reasonable one for a chemical to be.

Automatons didn’t sweat, but Hina wiped her brow and let out a long breath all the same. It felt like the appropriate gesture to make, given the circumstances. She took another look at her finished concoction.

It had plenty of mana, its effect was similar to the original rodenticide recipe, and its toxicity had received a major power-up.

Thoroughly satisfied with her work, Hina surveyed the room. The floor was so covered in empty bottles, the scene looked like the morning after a night of revelry. She went silent for a few seconds, then eventually puffed up her chest with pride.

"I *thought* I might be taking things a little too far!"

That was a fact that she couldn't deny. However, it was also a fact that she completed her concoction. She eagerly grabbed the tub but, a moment later, quickly came to her senses. She was an automaton, so the poison wouldn't affect her, but if she carelessly spilled any…

…th-then the maid uniform Lady Elisabeth so graciously gave me will get ruined!

She frantically glanced over her clothes. Fortunately, her mixing technique had been impeccable. In spite of all the countless bottles she'd thrown into that tub, not a single drop ended up getting spilled. It turned out that her status as a first-rate maid wasn't just for show. She breathed a sigh of relief. However, not even she would be able to protect her outfit while she carried the tub.

After all, she was about to embark on the grand task of trying to break through the swarm of rats.

"Um, well, I suppose I'll need one of *those*, but is there even one here…? Ah, there is! How lucky!"

After searching the room, she was able to locate the item she sought sitting on the left-hand shelf. It was a large box.

She rushed over to it and opened it up. Inside, she found exactly what she was looking for—the protective clothing that came bundled with large purchases of caustic chemicals. Just as she hoped, the two had been stored together.

"All I have to do is put this on, and it'll be smooth sailing from here! Ha-ha!"

Hina cheerfully donned the gleaming silver outfit, completely covering her lovely maid uniform. It looked rather bizarre, to the point where if Kaito saw it, he'd undoubtedly cry, *It's an alien!* However, Hina paid its appearance little heed, putting on the headpiece to cover the last bit of her body. Then she took the tub in her heavily bundled hands and held it tight.

"Just you wait, my beloved Master Kaito and dearest Lady Elisabeth! This time, I'm going to go finish what I failed to settle last time!"

Through the outfit, her resolute declaration got muffled and ended up sounding more like "Mm-mm, mm-mm, mm-mmph!"

Incidentally, this was around the time that Kaito and Elisabeth were lying sprawled in the hallway at the end of their unsuccessful grand search.

However, Hina still had no way of knowing that. Fully fired up, she began lumbering off with big, clumsy strides. She headed out into the

hallway. However, she immediately turned around and lumbered back into the room. This time, she remembered to grab the herbs.

Then she majestically strode out into the hallway.

And with that, the story wrapped back around to its beginning.

*

“Now then, have at you!”

And with that, Hina charged alone toward the massive swarm of rats.

The rats responded by rushing at her in kind. A cacophony of squeaking and chittering surrounded her on all sides. In fact, even the ivy began winding its way toward her. Apparently, obtaining such a large quantity of mana had bestowed it with something akin to intellect, and it had struck up a symbiotic relationship with the rats. Both it and the rats wanted to kill Hina and use her corpse for sustenance. However, Hina didn’t slow her charge.

Gah! They’re a lively bunch, aren’t they? —Not that I would expect anything less!

The tub’s contents lapped against its sides as she lugged it along.

If the ivy wound its way around her ankles or if she tripped on a rat, all her efforts up until then would have been for naught. However, her prospects of success still looked good. Even though she hadn’t added the rodenticide’s final ingredient—the herb—yet, it was already releasing a powerful odor. That alone was enough to make some of the more cowardly rats among her enemies’ ranks hesitant about approaching her. The rest were still leaping at her, but she managed to successfully dodge their attacks one after another.

However, the biggest reason behind her confidence was her protective clothing.

The material it was made of was unbelievably thick and durable, leaving her foes at a complete loss as to what to do. Incidentally, there was a good reason behind its ludicrously sturdy design. The kind of person who would go all the way to Mage’s Row just to pick up some pesticide was invariably wealthy and powerful. If one of their servants ended up dying when using the shop’s chemicals, they would likely come back demanding serious compensation.

Now, though, the sellers’ callous, calculating business savvy was helping Hina out in a major way.

Hee-hee-hee. If you think you can stop me, you’re welcome to try!

Her clothing made it difficult to walk, sure, but even when the rats bit her, she didn’t feel a thing. Plus, her legs were too thick for the ivy to be able to get a good grip on them. The only thing she had left to worry about was tripping, but the outfit’s weight helped out on that front, too.

After breaking through the opposing defensive line, Hina steadily made her way forward. If Kaito had been there to see her, he’d probably have

shouted, *When'd you become a rugby player?!* Sadly, not a single game of rugby had ever been played in this world, but that didn't stop Hina from continuing her unstoppable advance. However, the forces guarding the nest were the best of the best, and Hina knew better than to try brute-forcing her way through them.

"Oh dear…"

Then out of the blue, the rats and ivy changed tacks.

Hmm? It feels like…they've fallen back?

Hina tilted her head to the side in confusion. It was almost as though they'd sensed some sort of new enemy behind her.

Many of the rats broke off their attack on her, and some of the vines began making their way behind her as well.

As it turned out, her hunch was on the mark. But although there was a great commotion taking place behind her, her thick protective gear kept her from noticing it. A few drops of molten lead even splashed on her back, but somehow, that wasn't enough to catch her attention. Instead, she just took advantage of the fortuitous opening and made a mad dash straight ahead. At long last, she reached her goal—the dead end at the far side of the corridor.

Behind her glass visor, her emerald eyes gleamed.

There it is, just as I thought!

The rats had built their nest in a hole at the bottom of the wall. Because of their oversized bodies, their nest was similarly large, and it looked like the hole continued on for quite a way. However, rodenticide as powerful as Hina's could reach that far with ease.

The rats gnawed Hina all over as she stooped down. She shoved the tub into the burrow's entrance.

A chorus of indignant squeaks and chitters rose up around her.

Hina replied in an apologetic murmur.

"I'm sure you all just wanted to live out your days peacefully. I really am sorry about this."

However, she didn't stop.

Instead, she raised one of her hands, which was carrying the herbs, above the tub. When she spoke next, her voice rang with determination.

"But I'm the one who's been tasked with keeping this castle clean. And sadly, that means that dust, bugs, cobwebs, weeds, and rats have no place here! When I find you, dead or alive, it's my job to purge you from this castle's halls! However, I do ask that you kindly stop biting me before I die."

It was true. If not for her protective suit, the way they were biting her would have proved fatal, even for an automaton like her.

She raised her arm up high and spoke without a moment's hesitation.

"Now then—it's time to settle this!"

And with that, she hurled the herbs into the tub.

The herbs bobbed as they floated on the liquid's surface. A heavy silence filled the air.

Hina tilted her head to the side. *Hmm?*

Then a tremendous quantity of smoke gushed out with a deafening *FSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH*.

*

SKREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

Hina tensed up so badly, she practically joined the rats in their scream.

The smoke, still making a *FSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH* sound, billowed past her at an alarming clip. It was so dense that she couldn't see a thing. Hina couldn't help being thankful that she was an automaton. It was dangerous to take a direct hit point-blank like that, even with the protective suit.

"Oh, goodness… That gave me quite a fright."

At that point, she realized that the rats around her had all toppled, and the ones that had been clinging to her had fallen off. Her concoction had worked. In fact, it might well have been overkill.

She quietly clasped her hands together as though in prayer, then rose to her feet and clomped back the way she came.

The smoke had dirtied up her glass visor, and it soon became evident that it wasn't going to clear up on its own.

Hina deftly swapped the tub to one hand, then popped off her protective headpiece. She shook her head to clear the hair out of her face. Then, her eyes gleaming, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Phew, that should finally be all of them… Oh? Why, if it isn't my beloved Master Kaito and my dearest Lady Elisabeth! Whatever brings you down here?"

When she removed the protective gear, though, she discovered Elisabeth and Kaito standing before her.

It made no sense for them to be here, and Hina herself had no idea what was going on. However, one thing was clear—the two of them were definitely standing there. And what's more, their replies came in the form of a shout.

""THAT'S WHAT WE WANT TO AAAAAAASK!""

She blinked her emerald eyes in puzzlement.

Still dressed like an extraterrestrial, she cocked her head to the side. At that point, Kaito elaborated:

"You went missing, so Elisabeth and I have been looking everywhere for you."

"For me? Oh goodness, I'm ever so sorry. It was all part of my work for the day, and I figured I would be done in no time, so I didn't think I needed to tell you, but…could it be that it's much later than I think it is? Eek, oh no! I got so wrapped up in mixing that I lost track of the time! However can I possibly apologize?"

Hina gave a hurried bow. She had no idea that anywhere near that much time had passed.

Then a thought crossed her mind that caused her to panic so hard, she felt steam might come bursting out of her ears.

Oh, oh my, thank goodness they weren't there when I released the chemicals! Why, I very nearly engulfed my two most important people in poison gas!

In truth, she *had* actually engulfed them, but she of course had no way of knowing that.

"A-as long as you're safe, then there's no harm done. Come now, raise your head," Elisabeth encouraged her.

Hina very nearly replied that she couldn't because she hadn't finished expressing her penitence, but before she could get the words out, she spotted Kaito trying to peer inside the copper tub. She quickly shook her head and hid the tub behind her back.

"There isn't much left, but it's still emitting vapor! It's dangerous to stick your head in!"

"Hina…what exactly *is* that?"

"A secret mixture for exterminating rats, passed down since time immemorial, that I had stored in my Self-Recording Device! Or to be more precise, a special Murder Supreme Version of it that I came up with!"

"'Murder Supreme Version,' huh…?"

"You see, I ran into one of their survivors when I was making my evening rounds…"

And with that, Hina began honestly recounting everything that had happened in her long campaign against the rats. At the end, she passionately clenched her fist.

"If the unthinkable happened and a rat that large were to bite one of you, why, I wouldn't have been able to rest until I killed every last rat in the world!"

The other two nodded in understanding. It looked like they found her explanation satisfactory. That was a load off Hina's back. As her heart filled with relief, she felt a tingling of joy in it, too.

Ah… How truly, truly blessed I am!

In this world, nobody paid a second thought to the feelings of automatons. Yet these two had not just been worried about her, but they'd also even come looking for her themselves. It made her feel fortunate beyond belief.

She gave them a big, bright smile like a flower coming into full bloom.

"I really am sorry about the inconvenience, but thank you both so much. Knowing that my beloved Master Kaito and my dearest Lady Elisabeth were worried for my sake, why…it makes me feel more blessed than I could possibly dream of!"

Tears began slowly but surely welling up in her eyes. Before long, she was crying in earnest. Unsure what to do, Kaito and Elisabeth scratched their cheeks. Then they cheerily went on.

“C’mon, of course we were. It was our precious Hina we were talking about.”

“You work so hard for our sakes, and for all we knew, you might well have been in peril somewhere. ’Twas but a matter of course we’d come searching for you.”

Their words just made her happier and happier, and the tears kept coming. Kaito and Elisabeth affectionately came over and stood beside her.

The moment they did, they both let out cries of surprised realization.

“Whoa, Hina, your outfit’s crazy stiff.”

“It really is. ‘Crazy stiff’ is just the way I’d put it.”

“Hee-hee… It is built to be sturdy, you see.”

Hina smiled again and wiped away her tears. Now that the rematch with the rats was over, the three of them headed back the way they came.

The battle had left a pretty disastrous mess, and Hina knew she’d have to come back later and clean it all up. For now, though, she was going to take a little break. Her day had been full of joy, and there were so many things she wanted to write about in her diary.

With any luck, the next day would be similar, as would the day after it. A small wish welled up inside Hina.

Deep down, she knew it couldn’t possibly come true.

Yet even so, she wished that the happy days the three of them were spending together could go on forever and ever.

✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 9 ✦✦✦✦

I didn't know what kind of role Lewis had in mind for Alice.

All I knew was that I couldn't just leave her there.

He had no business getting an abused child involved with matters like these.

Alice opened her eyes wide, as though in surprise. Then she spoke in a quiet whisper.

"That's not fair, Mr. White Rabbit. If you had said anything else, I could have just killed you. I was all ready to go Off with his head. So why did you have to go and say that?"

"Alice, we have to run. This is no place for you. You deserve a better—"

"A better what? Where would you go? Where would you take me? You..."

Alice tilted her head to the side and gazed at me with her eyes still wide.

Then she spoke in the saddest voice imaginable.

"...you would have me leave Father all on his own?"

Even though she knew what he was plotting, she still referred to him as "Father." There was nothing I could say to that.

After all, I had seen the way he embraced her with my own two eyes.

There had been a definite kindness in the way he rubbed her small back even as she wounded him all over.

"Father cries at night, too, you know. 'Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me,' he says. Over and over and over. 'You think I'll forgive you? You think this is forgivable?!' he cries as he grits his teeth and bites his lip so hard that it bleeds. His hatred is what called me here. And his sadness is what saved me.

"I was killed in a far, faraway place, but then he invited me here to Wonderland.

"'Please come to me,' he called. And because he did..."

Because he did, I will forever be his "Alice." Just Alice, she whispered. That was when I realized—perhaps originally, she had some other, different name. Now, though, the opportunity to hear it was forever lost.

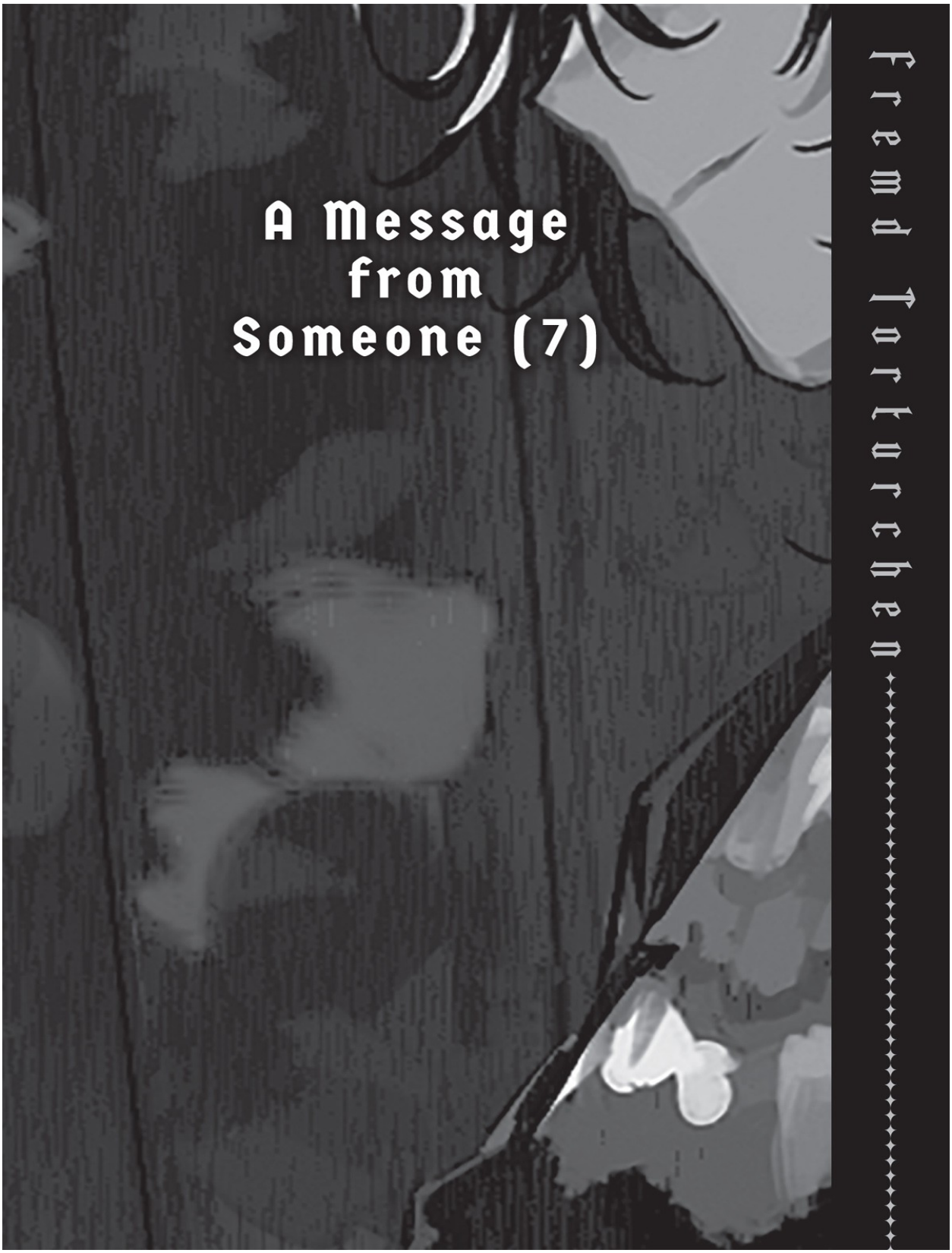
Alice snapped her fingers, and a teleportation circle spun up beneath my feet. "Alice!" I shouted. But she just looked at me in silence. In fact, the whole room was eerily silent. Then Alice spoke.

"Father forgave you, too. He never gave me the signal, you see. So it's okay—be free, Mr. White Rabbit. Return to your lonely journey and go wherever you please.

"Hurry on and follow your path, so that someday, you can die."

That's the sole reason we live, too.

And with that, I returned to my solitude.


A Message
from
Someone (7)

A Message from Someone (7)

I cursed, I resented, I hated, I despised, I grieved, I lamented, I cursed, I cursed, I cursed, and at the end of all my cursing…

…my wish was finally granted.

The end of days took place once more. The seeds of evil I'd sowed budded without fail. At that point, all that was left was for everyone to die. The stupid sheep would perish, persistent in their idiocy to the bitter end.

That would have been fine. Just deserts would have been served. That was the verdict I cast, and that was the wish I made. However…

…the person I am now—

—is not who I was then.

…Will you hear me out?

O anonymous listener who I once wished death upon?

It is a tale from long, long ago.

Back then, I made a fatal blunder. I brought about the end of days. But that wasn't my true intention. I didn't destroy the world because I wanted to. I was mistaken; don't get me wrong. One could even say that my very existence was an error. But even so, none of that changes the nobility of my goal.

I just wanted to save the world when nobody else would.

But in spite of that—

—at some point, I forgot.

He—the Mad King—was right. I forgot.

Back then—

—everyone was crying—

—and I wanted to make it so they didn't have to—

—so now—

—why?

Why are my ears—

—so full of screams and—?

*

"I caaaught him."

"Excellent work!"

Elisabeth was in the beastfolk lands.

Having successfully carried out her Peace Brigade duties for the day, Elisabeth returned to Valisisa Ula Forstlast's residence. With a listless announcement, she kicked the bound mage forward. Her beastfolk subordinates replied with their thanks, and one deer-headed soldier

dragged the man off to the dungeons for having committed the crime of ritualistic demon worship.

Elisabeth rotated her shoulders in exasperation. Lute walked up to her and handed her a hot cup of tea.

"I would expect nothing less. With this, we can strike another name off the most wanted list."

"That's all, correct? I shall be taking my break now. And my dinner, albeit a late one."

Shortly after she made her announcement, though, the door got violently kicked open.

The voice that rang out seemed somehow puppetlike, yet at the same time, it was strangely obnoxious.

"Pardon me. Elisabeth! Is Elisabeth Le Fanu around? **Listen to what I gotta say for a minute, bitch!**"

"Ah. 'Tis Jeanne… I see you've made your way here from the Capital again. How many times does this make, anyhow?"

"Don't worry about that; just listen. I don't understand what's going on in my little lady's head. **Women, I'm tellin' ya! Like, does she hate me? She doesn't hate me, does she?**"

"As far as I can tell, Izabella's never been much of a clingy type. I'm off now. Good-bye."

After exchanging a glance with Lute, Elisabeth beat a hasty retreat and made her way out into the hallway.

Once she'd made sure nobody was coming her way, Elisabeth tossed a jewel downward. It struck the floor and drew a teleportation circle atop it. Crimson flower petals and darkness sprayed up as far as the eye could see, and cylindrical walls the color of blood formed around her.

Fine cracks ran across them.

Then they were gone, and nobody remained within.

Elisabeth had vanished from the beastfolk lands.

*

Tick, tock… Tick-tock… Tick… Tock… Tick… Tock… Ti— Click.

Click.

"I've returned."

"Hey, welcome home."

Elisabeth spoke, and a cheerful voice called back.

Kaito tilted his chair backward. Still seated, he turned around.

The little knot that his faded brown hair was tied in dangled behind his head. As usual, his butler uniform looked completely ridiculous on his skinny frame. Appearing the same as always, he checked over the inventory listing for their main storeroom.

Elisabeth started to raise her hand to greet him…

Hmm?

…but halfway through, her arm froze. Something felt dangerously off. She cocked her head to the side.

Meanwhile, Kaito continued scribbling away with his quill pen. From time to time, he would smudge some ink or begin idly doodling.

It was an almost tear-inducingly mundane sight. There was nothing peculiar or amusing about it in the slightest.

Elisabeth chose not to put her discomfort into words. Instead, she strode over to Kaito with a wide gait. Without even looking at her, he pulled out the chair beside his and gestured at it with his chin.

“Mmm.”

“Aye.”

Elisabeth responded as though it were the most natural thing in the world, then sat down as well. A few seconds later, she cocked her head to the side again. However, she didn’t get a chance to vocalize what it was that seemed so odd.

Kaito slid the inventory list over to her and pointed at one of its blank spaces.

“Elisabeth, I gotta say, these documents suck.”

“Dullard… That’s the sole conclusion you reached after going at it all day? I’m out there working tirelessly, so the least you can do as my butler is keep my castle in order. Enough grousing—just do your job!”

Hmm? Hmmmm?

What was she *talking* about?

The words came to her readily, but they were accompanied by a third wave of indescribable malaise. She raised her hands up and down in consternation. Kaito, for his part, stretched his arms, then pursed his lips.

“I mean, you say that, but… Here, how’s this for a number that’ll knock your socks off? The last *seven years* of inventory just…aren’t listed.”

“Heavens, wouldn’t it be faster to simply discard them and start from scratch?”

“Right? That was the only real option I could come up with… Ugh, all that time wasted…”

Kaito let out a big yawn, then went limp and slumped facedown on the table. Elisabeth poked him in the head. Now was no time for sleeping. For her troubles, she received a strange “Gehhh.”

As the two of them fooled around, a pair of light footsteps drew near.

“Good work today, you two!”

Upon hearing the cheery voice, Elisabeth looked up and was greeted by a pair of gleaming green eyes and a head of silver hair. They belonged to a beautiful automaton in a maid outfit. Hina beamed adorably as she pushed her serving cart along.

Elisabeth found herself overcome with dizziness. However, she still had no idea why.

Hmhmmm?

“I’ve brought an afternoon snack for you, my beloved Master Kaito and my dearest Lady Elisabeth! There are tarts and muffins and cookies of every variety, so please go ahead and take whatever you like!”

“Damn, you made all that? You sure you aren’t overworking yourself, Hina?”

“Eek, my adorable husband is ever so kind! Take me now! *…Ahem.* Worry not. If it’s for my beloved Master Kaito and my dearest Lady Elisabeth, then even baking sweets is like being in paradise! Right now, I feel super-duper happy in strict moderation! Eek, it’s like the world itself is jealous of my joy!”

“Uh, okay… Well, I’m not sure I totally follow, but if you’re happy, then I’m happy, too.”

No, no, no, hold on a moment. ’Tis nice that Hina seems the same as always, but…

Something about it was weird. Elisabeth massaged her temples. But no matter how hard she thought, she couldn’t put her finger on what was so odd. Perhaps it wasn’t just one thing. In fact, if she were to force herself to put it into words, then…

“Everything” is odd.

“Lady Elisabeth, which one would you like?”

“The raspberry and honey tart, I should think!”

In that moment, though, Elisabeth ceased wondering. She eagerly extended her hand.

With a “But of course,” Hina deftly dished up the tart. Elisabeth peered down at the plate.

The tart was piled extravagantly high with raspberries, and the honey gave it a glossy sheen. Looking at it was like feasting her eyes on a mountain of rubies. As Elisabeth grabbed a fork, Kaito made a sly quip.

“Man, I can practically see a tail and a pair of ears twitching on you.”

“Silence, you. I’m no cat.”

“And yet you’re the only one who said anything about cats… Looks like even you realize it.”

“If I had to choose between being a cat or a dog, I would be a dog! I’d roll on my back, show Master Kaito my belly, and wag my tail so hard, it would almost fall off! Woof, woof!”

“That’s nice, honey. Even without a tail, you’re plenty cute already.”

Kaito patted Hina’s head past her soft maid hat. As Hina let out more delighted woofs, Elisabeth joined her hand to the petting. Hina was overcome with joy.

Their Hina-cherishing party continued on like that for a little while. Perhaps it was just Elisabeth’s imagination, but the air in the room seemed a bit warmer than it had been before.

With the mood suitably lightened, Elisabeth turned back to her plate and spoke with a smile.

“Now then, to the tart!”

“I do hope it’s to your liking!”

“Make sure you slow down and chew it so you don’t choke.”

“What do you take me for, a child?”

As she shot a complaint Kaito’s way, Elisabeth brandished her fork and sliced carefully through the crust so as not to disturb the cream or the raspberries. Then she slowly lifted the bite to her mouth, and—

“…It tastes like nothing.”

—with a *thud*—

—all the lights went out.

*

Tick, tock… Tick-tock… Tick… Tock… Tick… Tock… Ti-ti-ti-ti—

Creeeeeeeeeeak.

"Now then, I suppose that marks the end of the first act."

A deep voice echoed through the air, and a lamp lit up in the darkness as though it had been waiting for that very moment.

The lamp's candle cast a white circle around itself. Because it was pitch-black, even that meager light source seemed as blinding as the sun.

Elisabeth squinted. She could see a pearl-gray tablecloth extending out from the circle on into the darkness. Silver buffet platters sat atop it, laden with food so colorful that they almost looked like they were made of wax.

There were a number of hors d'oeuvres, from a translucent jelled oyster dish and a vividly orange marinated salmon to a broad selection of pâtés. The table was absolutely packed with fragrant foods. However, nobody was partaking in the spread, which looked too good to be true.

There was but one person there.

The silhouette of a man, sitting at the head of the table.

He wore a silk shirt with a cravat, and his coat was decorated with silver thread.

Ignoring the buffet platters, he instead ate from a single pure-white dinner plate. Upon the porcelain dish was a slab of meat with blood dripping from it. The raw liver didn't even look seasoned. The man cut thin slices of the meat and carried them to his mouth with his fork.

The darkness was broken up only by the candlelight and the soft sound of dishes clinking.

After looking at the man's crimson eyes, silky black hair, and beautiful features, which resembled her own, Elisabeth spoke.

"And who the hell are you?"

"Oh, come now, precious daughter of mine. This thing you do where you forget I exist isn't nearly as endearing as you think."

Vlad Le Fanu put down his knife and fork. Elisabeth merely gave him a scoff.

She knew perfectly well who he was. However, her resentment toward Vlad ran deep. The mere fact that she was willing to regard him with apathy instead of outright hostility was a supreme display of self-control. At that point, though, Elisabeth cocked her head to the side.

What was it that Vlad just said?

"…What first act?"

"In a sense, we stand at a legend's end. The space beyond the fairy tale."

All of a sudden, Vlad began speaking. He lifted his knife and fork once more.

As he sliced up his meat, crimson blood trickled forth from it.

“This is the stage past the curtain’s fall, the shell of what remains after the final act that was the end of days—but the performance’s end, you see, was nowhere near adequate. With its lease on life renewed, the world continued on. But the bells would eventually toll on a new curtain’s rise.”

For that is the way bells and curtains are.

Ting.

After cutting his meat, Vlad dinged his knife against the plate’s surface.

Then he slowly looked up at Elisabeth, his mouth curling into a smile as he went on.

“*Preventing the play from ending*. *The three races, unified*. *A noble sacrifice*. It’s moving, don’t get me wrong. A tale well worth telling. But what about the story that follows it?”

“…What story?”

“*Revolution*. *Revenge*. *Betrayal*. Any and all of these require diving deep into the actor’s psyche and motives. And that means the story that follows can hardly be told. Eventually, all of it will be buried beneath the black veil of history. And with no regard paid to those who fought so valiantly… Although, of course, it’s entirely too early to tell if there’ll still be a world where one could tell it in the first place. Things *are* starting to look a little grim.”

Deftly moving his fork, he brought a taut slice of liver to his mouth and laid it atop his tongue. Then he popped it into his mouth, almost as though hammering home his statement to Elisabeth.

The meat’s crimson blood painted his lips a slightly darker shade of red as he let out a casual laugh.

“Nobody’s going to like this. Even seasoned veterans will want to avert their gazes. That’s just the way it’s going to play out.”

“Vlad, don’t tell me… Did you hit your head or something?”

“You know, your concern might well be touching if it weren’t always so insulting!”

On hearing Elisabeth’s reply, Vlad set his utensils back down.

In an unusual turn of events, it sounded like he was being relatively serious about what he was talking about. *But what of it?* Elisabeth frowned. For her part, there was a fretfulness eating away at her so intensely, it felt like her neck was burning.

Something is off—I’m certain of it.

Her vision wavered. Vlad’s description was unpleasant, but more than that, it was disquieting.

There was something lurking just below the surface, something she mustn’t lay eyes on. However, Elisabeth couldn’t even figure out what it was. Every time she tried to think about it, she was obstructed by an intense headache.

“What…is this?”

Elisabeth pressed down on her forehead. Vlad went back to eating.

After elegantly making his way through the meat, he wiped his lips with his napkin and looked up.

“Caught your attention?”

“What?”

The question came out of the blue, and it was notably lacking a subject. However, Elisabeth didn’t get a chance to ask him to elaborate.

Vlad nodded all on his own, then snapped his fingers. Darkness and azure flower petals filled the air. When they cleared, all that remained on the table was a single bowl. It was deep, and filled to the very brim with water.

The water’s surface, flat as a mirror, was projecting an image of somewhere else.

Elisabeth’s eyes went wide. She gasped.

“Kaito, Hina…”

Kaito and Hina were sleeping, huddled up together with peaceful expressions on their faces. They looked almost serene.

It was just beautiful, nothing more. There wasn’t anything odd about it. Everyone knew they were married, and it was perfectly normal for married people to sleep together. However…

It seems so…distant.

That calm, gentle scene was farther away than the world’s end. Elisabeth was overcome with a crushing sense of isolation.

She knew that the image on the water was just that, an image, but that alone didn’t explain why she felt the way she did. It was like the entire space they were in was cut off from her by some sort of transparent wall.

She gazed wordlessly at the two of them. Vlad laughed a low, booming laugh.

Ignoring him, she reached out, even knowing there was no way she’d be able to touch the scene atop the water’s surface.

After all, it wasn’t real. There was nothing there to reach.

There shouldn’t have been anyway. And yet.

And…yet?

…Splash!

Tick, tock… Tick-tock… Tick… Tock… Tick… Tock… Ti-ti-ti-ti—

Creeeeeee—

—eeeak?

*

“Hey, Elisabeth, what’s going on?”

“Are you all right, Lady Elisabeth?”

“……Hmm?”

Elisabeth slowly opened her eyes, only to have them immediately seared by a dazzling light.

At some point, the room had brightened up. She could still see the pearl-gray tablecloth stretched out atop the table before her, but the silver platters and waxy-looking food were nowhere to be seen.

Neither was Vlad, for that matter. In fact, Elisabeth had even swapped places with him and was now sitting at the head of the table herself. And the silver bowl with the image of Kaito and Hina had been swapped out for something as well. It was some sort of strangely majestic container.

Elisabeth peered intently at the newly appeared object.

I know this. 'Tis…

It was something she herself had once created on Kaito's request.

It was an earthenware pot.

What in the world was it doing there? No, no. There was something more pressing to consider.

Namely, the fact that Kaito and Hina were standing right next to her. After looking down at her from both sides, they spoke.

"No response. It looks like she's a corpse or somethi— Mmph!"

"Come now, Master Kaito! I love you dearly, but you mustn't make rude jokes like that about women! Lady Elisabeth is a sensitive soul!"

"Y-yeah, you're right. My bad… Seriously, though, Elisabeth, are you okay?"

"Well, I am a tad worried about the way Hina sees me."

Elisabeth frowned. From her perspective, she thought of Hina like a little sister, yet for some reason, it felt like she was the one being pampered.

"Hmhm!" Hina puffed out her chest in an inexplicable display of pride. A half beat later, though, she hopped into the air with a start.

"Whoa! Why, Lady Elisabeth responded!"

"Whoa! What's going on, Elisabeth? You were totally spacing out there."

"Spacing…out? No, I was just… Vlad was…"

"Did you not want your *purin*?"

"…Purin?"

On hearing that, Elisabeth looked back over to the earthenware pot. Its lid was still on, but now that he mentioned it, she could definitely make out the pleasant aroma of eggs, milk, and sugar. It was, without a doubt, packed full of wobbly, pale-yellow goodness. Elisabeth instinctively reached for its lid, but she then stopped and shook her head.

"No, wait, the raspberry tart… What became of my tart?"

"Hmm? A tart? Would you have preferred a tart, Lady Elisabeth?"

"No, no, that isn't it. It feels as though I can't tell up from down."

Assailed by another headache, Elisabeth pressed down on her forehead. Now that she thought about it, everything was just downright bizarre.

Her memories felt like they flowed into one another, but there were no logical links among them. They seemed to defy not just time, but space as well. As they watched her start brooding over the subject, Kaito and Hina exchanged a glance. They stepped back from the table.

Then they crouched down and started whispering to each other.

“Did she say that she wanted a tart, and not *purin*? Am I just misremembering it?”

“If I may be so bold, I’m quite sure she said *purin*… But you have to remember, Lady Elisabeth is a growing girl. It’s not strange for her tastes to change from day to day. Not to worry, though—we have plenty of apples, so I can go start making a tart right this moment!”

“Wait, what? Elisabeth’s still growing?”

“Oh yes! Why, she’ll probably end up being as big as me!”

“Are you talking about my chest or my height over there?”

At that point, Elisabeth couldn’t help but cut in. It was a matter of some interest to her.

Kaito leaped in place. “Oh God, she could hear us.” Hina cheerfully raised her arm up high. “Your height!”

“Very well, then!”

“Huh? Wait, but if Elisabeth grows as tall as Hina, won’t that make me the shortest one? This is bull.”

Kaito began quietly grumbling. Elisabeth considered poking fun at him but quickly thought better of it. She didn’t want Hina scolding her and telling her that it wasn’t nice to tease guys about their height.

And besides, this was no time for snark, not when she still didn’t know what was going on.

Elisabeth turned back to the earthenware pot. Its lid seemed to have a sort of larger-than-life presence.

EAT ME, it was saying.

This is what appeared in the silver bowl’s place…

Elisabeth reached out again, but this time, she actually took off the top.

When she did, the jiggly yellow *purin* within came into view. With the lid removed, the sweet smell of milk, eggs, and sugar was free to permeate the air unobstructed. Kaito and Hina started loudly chattering.

“Hey, looks like it came out pretty all right.”

“Just what I’d expect from you, Master Kaito! Your powers of creation rival even God’s!”

For some reason, hearing that comment filled Elisabeth with annoyance.

That aside, though, *purin* was food. A dessert.

That was an undeniable fact. And as such, it would be absurd for her not to eat it.

She slowly picked up her spoon and plunged it into the *purin*’s soft surface, scooping up a spoonful that was syrupy and droopy on the sides. Its texture was as splendid as always. She carefully lifted it up.

Then she popped it in her mouth.

“Hey, she ate it.”

“Hooray!”

“Mm, mm, mm, mmph.”

What Elisabeth had tried to say was *Why are* you two *getting excited?* Due to the spoon in her mouth, though, the words came out all muffled. This time, she could taste it like normal, and its sweet flavor filled her mouth.

The dish had a full-bodied aroma, just as it was supposed to. Its deliciousness had a rustic simplicity to it, yet at the same time, the way it melted in her mouth was unlike anything else she'd ever eaten. It was hard to believe that such a sublime dish had come from such a foolish servant.

Now that she thought about it, though, she remembered that *purin* was the only thing Kaito had been able to make properly.

Wait, had been*?*

Not *was*?

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow a smidgen. However, she didn't let her discomfort stop her from moving her spoon. For whatever reason, Kaito and Hina were watching her with bated breath. She couldn't exactly stop now.

Eventually, the spoon met the bottom of the pot.

With great vigor, Elisabeth scraped up the final bite.

"Ooooh."

"Aaaaah."

"As I said, what in the world is it that you two find so riveting about this?"

When Elisabeth shot her quip at them, though, they responded with a round of applause. They clearly weren't listening to a word she said. It defied explanation. However, it was also kind of nice. She held her spoon up and struck a proud pose.

When she looked back down at the mouthful of *purin* atop the spoon, though, she froze.

Sitting on the smooth utensil—

—there was something small and white.

"…A rabbit?"

A white rabbit.

The white rabbit had a matter-of-fact look on its face, and it was carrying a pocket watch. Both of the watch's hands, long and short, were pointing straight at twelve. And Elisabeth knew. The appointed time had come long, long ago. Days gone past would never return. And though the rabbit didn't look like it was talking, it was. It opened its mouth wide—

—and from inside, darkness came—

—Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down Down.

Down.

*

Alice fell down a very deep hole.

“Welcome, Elisabeth. Welcome to Wonderland.”

Elisabeth could hear a young girl. She was saying something about “Wonderland.” But Elisabeth couldn’t see a thing.

Everything around her was pitch-black.

Lying on her back, Elisabeth cast her gaze in every direction. No matter which way she turned, though, all she was met with was a dark that never seemed to end. The blackness had an oddly stuffy quality to it. It was as though she were surrounded by heavy cloth, like the kind that kept stage wings hidden from the audience.

But right when Elisabeth began pondering her situation in earnest, she heard a *thump* on the floor. The wooden floorboards creaked. Then the noise repeated itself, eventually developing into a sort of pitter-patter.

’Tis the sound of someone running.

Specifically, a child’s footsteps.

They were innocently running laps around Elisabeth. Suddenly, though, she could hear the heels snap together.

The resultant silence was nigh deafening. Elisabeth heard someone exhale, then rattle off a quote that sounded like a monologue from a play.

“After all that bouncing around, it’s finally time for my debut, Elisabeth! Now, what act is this again? I haven’t the faintest, you see. But neither do you, right? In fact, things have gone so far off the rails that nobody, not the actors or the director or even the playwright, can really tell what’s going on. And you’re also a spectator, so that goes double for you. Say, Elisabeth, isn’t it sad? Even here, you’re oh-so-very sad… No, actually, maybe that’s wrong. After all, this isn’t a tragedy so much as it is a farce… Wait, Father, where are we going? Huh? ‘This isn’t our place to appear,’ you say? ‘We weren’t called for, so we should stand down’? You’re ever so kind, Father… Hmm? Wait, hey, don’t leave me behind! Wait for me!”

With a peeved cry, the girl pitter-pattered off, then leaped.

Right above her, the sound of someone’s joints snapping sounded out, and the echo of the girl’s footsteps vanished. It would seem that she was dangling off someone’s shoulder. The other party’s clothes rustled a little as they set off.

A short while later, Elisabeth heard a door open in the distance, then close. Silence descended on her once more.

Who were those people just now? She didn’t know. What she did know, though—

—was that she didn’t trust them one bit.

*

“And then just when you thought the still darkness would go on forever…”

“…Hmm?”

“…someone showed up with an incongruous hello, hello, hello!”

Elisabeth cocked her head. She could hear someone saying something stupid.

There was obviously someone new present in the murk. However, she couldn't see anyone. She strained her eyes and cautiously scanned the darkness. Sure enough, one section of it had an oddly "occupied" feel to it.

Yet I never heard any footsteps.

It was like they had manifested out of thin air. She frowned.

However, her concern went unnoticed by her mysterious guest. Intentional or not, they let out a merry cry.

"All righty then, Madam Elisabeth! Time to wake up, hey, hey, hey!"

"Wake…up? No, hold on, I'm—"

"Up—and—at 'emmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

A shout that sounded like some sort of strange bird echoed through the air.

Sensing danger, Elisabeth leaped to her feet, then rolled forward and opened her eyes.

After, she shot a glance backward. Behind her, there was a scaly leg with gleaming claws resting atop a crack in the stone floor. The force of the kick had split open the ground where she'd been just moments ago.

The perpetrator of this powerful attack let out a small breath. However, that wasn't to say Elisabeth actually saw them do so. The thing was, their entire mouth was hidden by the darkness beneath their hood.

The man, concealed from head to toe in a tattered cloak, struck a pose.

"Phew… That there was my Butcher's Knockout Alarm-Clock Kick—and brilliantly executed, if I do say so myself!"

"You never possessed any such technique!"

Elisabeth couldn't help but shout back at the top of her lungs. The Butcher just stood there with his bag on his shoulder and his finger pointing at the sky. It was unclear if he'd even heard her. She turned toward his majestic back and gave him a piece of her mind.

"And besides, was your aim to wake me or to kill me?! The latter makes the former quite a challenge, I'll have you know! You're inscrutable, illogical, and baffling to boot! *Cough, cough.*"

"Willing to even sacrifice your throat to deliver cutting jabs and comebacks… You never fail to impress, Madam Elisabeth. You're an artist through and through."

"And don't go accusing people of bizarre forms of artistry, either! *Cough, cough, cough.*"

Elisabeth lapsed into a heavy fit of coughing. It had been quite a while since the last time she strained her voice that much.

Before her, a nostalgic figure—the Butcher—hopped up and down in an excessive show of good cheer.

Elisabeth sat cross-legged and decided to stop paying so much heed to his antics. The bare stone floor was cold on her legs. Curious as to where

she was, she glanced around. It was a small, cramped room with little in the way of furniture save for the bed beside her. The bed had a simple design but was high-quality all the same. Over on the stone wall, there were magically reinforced knives embedded in a map.

It was a room she was well familiar with. After all, it was the Torture Princess's own bedroom.

Instead of the bed, though, she seemed to have been lying atop the floor.

"Why am I down here? Or no, rather…what exactly is going on?"

"Hyah!"

"Hmm?"

All of a sudden, the Butcher leaped. Elisabeth watched him as he landed on the wall, scuttled across it, and plucked a knife out from the map. He then landed back on the floor, pulled an apple from his sleeve, and began peeling it.

There clearly hadn't been any actual need for him to crawl across the wall. Elisabeth gave him a skeptical glance.

"Peel, p-peel peel, peel peel peel."

"…What exactly do you think you're doing?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh, I'm peeling an apple."

"Well, yes, I can see *that*."

"Your cough got me worried, Madam Elisabeth! And so I thought, why not serve you this delicious, juicy apple?! And for dessert, I can make you some meat!"

"You seem to have your dessert and your entrée switched up there."

Elisabeth was starting to tire of having to play the straight man. The Butcher gave her a wordless thumbs-up. In translation, that probably meant *Exactly!* The skepticism in Elisabeth's glance grew, and silence descended on them.

Round and round the apple went in the Butcher's hand as he peeled it. The long strip of red skin traced a path through the air that seemed almost preordained. As she watched it wind like a snake, Elisabeth let out a quiet murmur.

"Say, Butcher."

"What is it, Madam Elisabeth? Ah, could it be that you'd like me to cut it into a bunny shape for you?"

"Why? Why betray us?"

The skin snapped. However, its descent was cut short.

As the red peel fluttered in a downward spiral, the Butcher snagged it by the end. He spun it like he was playing with a toy, its red exterior and white interior turning and turning and turning again.

"…It doesn't mean much, asking that 'here' and 'now.'"

His voice was a soft whisper.

Strangely, though, his tone was calm. He continued rotating the apple skin as he went on.

“Asking ‘me’ is no different from turning to a mirror and asking your own reflection. Asking yourself a question meant for another will leave you forever seeking a reply, and asking yourself a question with no right answer is the first step toward having your heart break for good… I agonized over the same thing myself, you know. Why did *she* appoint me as her apostle?”

“…Butcher.”

Round and round the spiral turned.

Then out of the blue, the Butcher released it, then dropped the apple itself in turn. Its bare white flesh spun slowly as it drifted through the air, silently passing through the space that was separating Elisabeth and the Butcher.

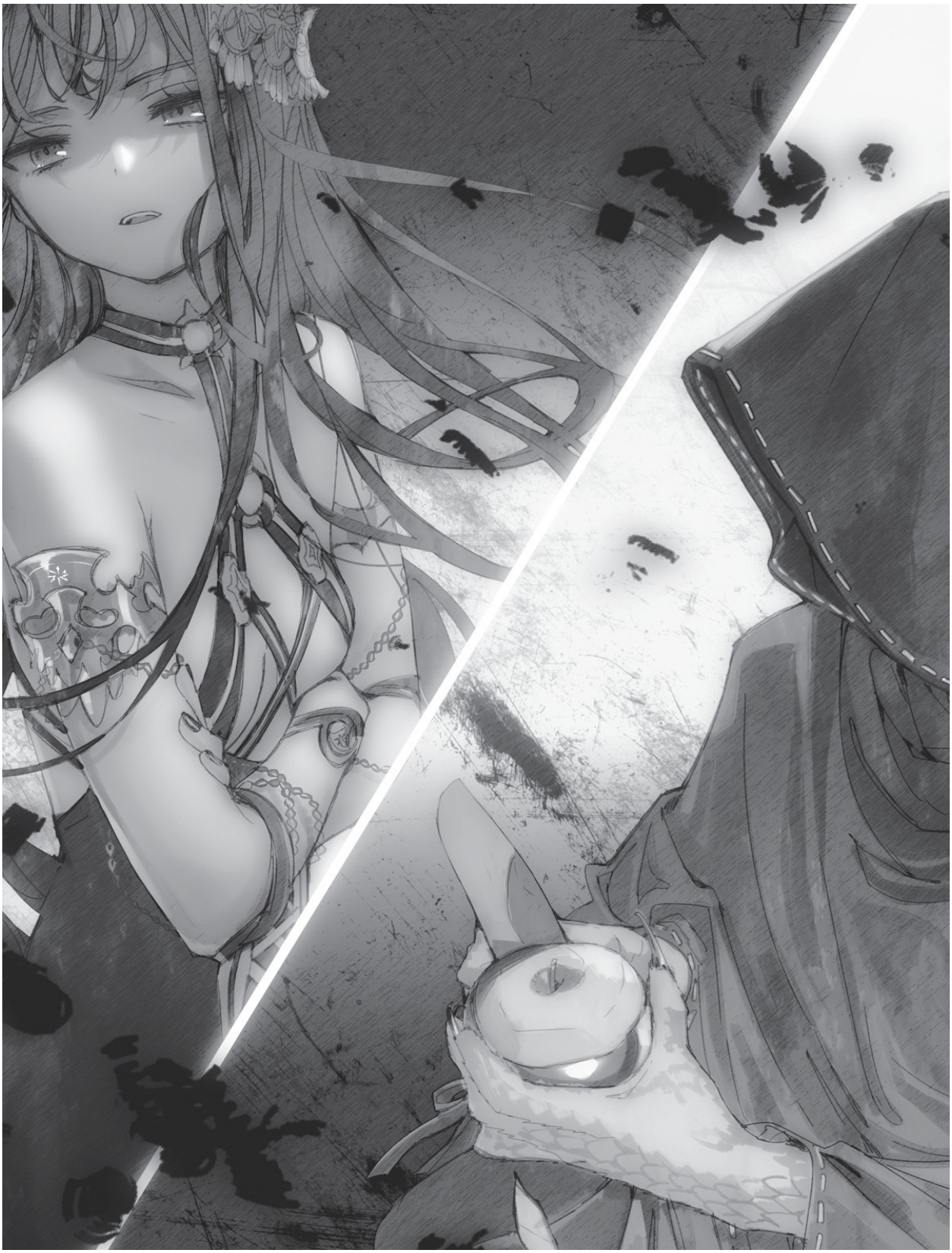
He was standing on the other side of that apple. Elisabeth directed a faint smile at that hidden face of his.

“That was a falsehood, no?”

“How very right. Or at least, just ‘not a truth’… I’m sure even you realize, Madam Elisabeth—the ‘real me’ never agonized over anything of the sort.”

“Probably not, no… No, you didn’t, no doubt. What a repugnant thought. You didn’t even bother thinking; you just accepted your lot as a sacrificial pawn. Idiot.”

With zero warning, Elisabeth stuck out her arm and snatched the falling apple out of the air. Then with a *chomp*, she bit into it and began violently chewing its flesh. The Butcher said nothing.



Elisabeth kept eating, spitting out seeds as she went. The small black lumps fell to the floor.

Then she wiped her juice-covered mouth.

“Why, you might well be the biggest idiot I know. What kind of fool spreads seeds of evil through the world he claims to love so dearly?”

“This kind of fool, I suppose. I’m not proud of it, you know. But ‘in their heart of hearts, everyone has just one thing that truly matters to them,’ so it’s not like I had much choice in the matter.”

The Butcher quietly nodded. Elisabeth clicked her tongue as she ruminated on his words.

“In their heart of hearts, everyone has just one thing that truly matters to them.”

It sounded as though they’d come from someone else.

When she finished eating the apple, she tossed its core over her shoulder. It smacked into the wall and fell to the floor. After turning to face the Butcher once more, she narrowed her eyes in irritation.

“And one more thing. About me.”

“Yes? What might that be?”

“I think I’ve come to understand.”

“Come to understand what, might I ask?”

The Butcher cocked his head. Elisabeth closed her eyes and turned her gaze upward. Then she shifted her weight and collapsed back into empty space. But before she could fall, her head struck something.

She was reclining against something hard, smooth, and cold.

“What ‘this world’ is.”

The Butcher offered her no response.

Even with her eyes closed, Elisabeth knew.

He was gone—

—nowhere to been seen.

*

Tick, tock… Tick-tock… Tick… Tock… Tick… Tock… Ti-ti-ti-ti—

Creeeeeee—

—eeeak!

“…For in short, that is what your existence amounts to.”

As Elisabeth finished her murmur, she sat up straight and slowly opened her eyes.

As she expected, there were two people smiling before her.

“Oh hey, Elisabeth’s up.”

“And a very good morning to you, Lady Elisabeth! Did you sleep well?”

“Kaito. Hina.”

She was back in the dining hall. She realized now that she was sitting atop a cabriole-legged chair.

As for the other two, Kaito was standing on a wooden stepladder, and Hina was holding it steady. For whatever reason, they seemed to be decorating the walls. After Kaito finished sticking some ribbons up by the ceiling, Hina passed him a handful of artificial flowers.

The way they looked working together was so sickeningly adorable, Elisabeth could hardly bear to watch. She shot them a question.

"So what in the world are you two doing?"

"Huh? We're getting ready for your third-year anniversary party as captain of the Peace Brigade—what else?"

"Master Kaito wanted to surprise you, and I was in full support!"

"Yes, well, that's all very nice, Hina. But it hardly seems like much of a surprise if you do the preparations in front of me, does it?"

"I mean, you're not wrong."

"In fact, I would go so far as to say that Lady Elisabeth is right."

Kaito and Hina crossed their arms contemplatively. Hina aside, it was odd not having Kaito play the straight man. As a collective married unit, though, they definitely fell on the other end of that particular spectrum. Elisabeth pondered how best to respond.

After giving the matter some thought, Kaito finally spoke.

"But at the end of the day, you wouldn't want us decorating the dining hall and inviting people over without your say-so, right?"

"Aye, that would be a problem indeed."

Elisabeth nodded. It was a legitimate concern. Plus, if he hadn't checked in ahead of time, there was a risk that Elisabeth would be busy meeting with an envoy from the Church or something on the day of the event.

Kaito had clearly put some thought into the matter. However, Elisabeth cocked her head anyway.

"Wait, you said something about guests? It's not just you two—you invited others?"

"Hey, this is a big deal! It's been three whole years since you got a job besides just fighting demons! We even handwrote invitations and everything."

"Don't worry, Lady Elisabeth, you won't have to do a thing! Hospitality is a specialty of mine! Plus, we made sure to stock the wine cellar beforehand, and I prepared plenty of food!"

"My my, it's so lively in here. Look at you all, innocent as babes. I must say, I'm impressed with your ability to maintain such dogged interest in this world."

Suddenly, Elisabeth heard a deep voice that was as smooth as butter. She frowned.

As Kaito fiddled with the artificial flowers' placement, he fired a casual response back.

"Vlaaad? You being snide over there?"

"Perish the thought! This is sarcasm, snide's softer cousin!"

Elisabeth jerked her head to the left. Sitting brazenly beside her was a man dressed in an aristocratic coat. His was a face she'd seen not long ago. Elisabeth wrung a strained question out of her throat.

"And what exactly are *you* doing here, you lout?"

"Ha-ha-ha! I wasn't expecting a warm reception by any means, but even so, that's quite the cold shoulder you're giving me, my dear. The fact of the matter is, here is where I am. There's little to be done for it."

"No, but why—?"

"Come now, think about it. I've always been an obstinate one, if I do say so myself. Even death wasn't enough to get rid of me. And that's why I'm still here—because that's the way you perceive me. You understand what I'm getting at, I assume?"

Vlad shrugged. After a short silence, Elisabeth nodded. In other words, that was just the kind of person she saw him as. She slumped back in her chair.

"I see. Then I suppose that's that, then."

"So it is. It's not like I'm here by choice, after all. Like it or not, here I am… I will remind you, though, that the world of man is full of pointless trivialities. Enjoying them is what makes us human. Our species' very existence is rooted in absurdity."

"See, now you're just spouting nonsense."

"Ha-ha. I see you won't be tricked quite so easily. You're a sharp one, my precious. If my dear successor were in your place, I'd have you fooled backward and forward by now. He really could stand to be a bit more of a skeptic."

"I can hear you, y'know," Kaito grumbled in annoyance.

Now that he had finished putting up the fake flowers, he started descending the stepladder. Halfway down, though, he stopped in place and glanced at Hina. She was standing expectantly by with her arms spread wide.

Without missing a beat, Kaito leaped into them. She caught him and spun him round and round.

As always, the pair never missed a chance to flirt.

"Ha-ha-ha, Hina, Hinaaaaa!"

"Hee-hee-hee, Master Kaito, Master Kaitooooo!"

"By the way, those two have been like that this whole time, so it's taken them ages to get anything done."

"Aye, I don't doubt it for a moment."

"Expected as it may be, I must say, it's a most inefficient way of working. **And I'm not sayin' that 'cause I'm jealous or anything, mind you!**"

The voice that rang out seemed somehow puppetlike, yet at the same time, it was strangely obnoxious.

Elisabeth looked up. Long, honey-blond hair fluttered at the entrance to the dining hall.

It would seem that the first guest—

—had arrived a little early.

*

The girl—Jeanne de Rais—had a golden beauty to her. Elisabeth glanced her over from top to bottom.

Then she nodded and spoke in dispassionate tone.

"…Jeanne. It's a trivial thing, I'll admit, but this is ostensibly a banquet. Could you not have come in normal clothes or, at the very least, covered a bit more skin up?"

"You say 'normal,' but to me, this outfit is normal. And besides, isn't your outfit much the same as mine? **You look just as much like a flasher as I do, lady!**"

"See, you're even aware that you look like a flasher. Go and get yourself dressed up a little."

Jeanne was wearing the same obscene bondage dress as always. Only mages possessed garments woven from pure magic like that, but even in the Capital, it was highly irregular for them to wear it when they weren't on duty. Jeanne did have a point, though. Elisabeth's outfit had a bit more cloth to it than hers, but on the whole, they were still exceedingly similar. That said, this was Elisabeth's castle—even she had the decorum to put on a regular dress when she headed out in public. As such, she decided to ignore her own hypocrisy. Jeanne crossed her arms in annoyance.

"I must say, that really isn't any of your business. And besides, I came not as a guest but to help set up. C'mon, anyone coulda figured out that those two dumb-asses would be wasting the day away gigglin' and gagglin' at each other! And plus, callin' this a banquet? Get off your fuckin' high horse!"

"Dressing up—now there's an idea. I think that's a wonderful suggestion."

Suddenly, a dignified voice cut in. Jeanne froze, then quickly straightened her posture.

Footsteps could be heard echoing from the entrance to the dining hall.

When Elisabeth cast her gaze in that direction once more, she was greeted with the sight of an alabaster beauty. The comforting voice continued:

"After all, Jeanne, it would be a shame to waste that beauty of yours. I'm sure you would look stunning in a formal dress… We did leave separately, but even so, it was my oversight as well. Next time, I'll be sure to get you something nice to wear."

"Yes. **No.** Yes."

"Well, don't go panicking, now."

Elisabeth tried to calm Jeanne down, but it was clearly an exercise in futility. Jeanne wasn't very familiar with the subtleties of her own emotions, and her romantic experience was more or less nonexistent.

In other words, having her first love, Izabella Vicker, say something like that to her had proven instantly lethal.

As Izabella took her spot by Jeanne's still-frozen side, Kaito and Hina finally noticed their new visitors.

"Hmm?"

"Oh?"

The two of them had stopped spinning a little while ago.

Still holding each other tight, they looked up in unison. Kaito let out an excited shout.

"Jeanne, Izabella, you made it! And so early, too!"

"Of course. We would hardly turn away such an invitation, much less coming from you. But we owe all three of you a great debt; it hardly feels right being treated as guests. If you don't mind, I'd love to help out however I can. But first, Hi—rather, Mrs. Sena, this is for you."

"Oh, what lovely flowers! That's so thoughtful of you!"

"I do hope they're to your liking. I'm glad I could do my part to add some color to the banquet."

Izabella offered Hina the bouquet she was holding, and Hina took it with a warm smile.

It was composed of lilies paired with a new type of flower bred by the beastfolk, and they were arranged in a beautiful silver-and-white composition. Their thin stems were adorned with countless little florets that shone like stars.

As Hina buried the tip of her nose in the bouquet, Izabella smiled gently.

"Ah, it sets off your lovely hair just the way I hoped it would. I imagine it would look nice next to Elisabeth's dark hair, too."

"Hey! Izabella! Quit trying to seduce my wife!"

Izabella and Hina stared blankly at Kaito.

A moment later, Hina's face went bright red. Words spilled out of her lips as fast as her mouth could make them.

"O-oh, no, no, no, I'm sure Ms. Izabella didn't have any such intentions, and even if she did, my gears would fall out and stop before I fell for anyone other than you, but even so, Master Kaito, were you being jealous just now? Was that jealousy? Eek! Thank you, God, for this blessing! My heart's beating so hard that it feels like it might become an inferno that turns all creation to ash!"

"Th-this is a misunderstanding, Sir Kaito! I wasn't doing anything of the sort! It's not just your wife—I do this for all sorts of people! To comfort wounded knights, and to welcome new recruits! And besides, I thought they would set off your strong-willed eyes as well!"

As Hina wriggled and squirmed with glee, Izabella hurriedly explained herself.

Kaito couldn't help but massage his temples. Satisfied with her answer, he nodded.

“All right, I get what’s going on now… You’ve got, like, bucket-loads of secret admirers among the other paladins, don’t you?”

“Wh-what? Secret admirers?”

“Yeah, I figure you’ve got plenty of guys and girls who’re totally head over heels for you,” he continued.

“H-head over heels?”

Elisabeth nodded in agreement. “Aye, I concur. I can picture it with remarkable ease.”

“Right?” Kaito quipped.

Elisabeth thought about it. Over the years, the Church had been home to more than its fair share of corruption, and on top of that, many paladins had lost their lives in the battles against the Torture Princess and Vlad’s demon army. How beautiful must their young commander have looked, carrying out her duties amid all that madness?

Plus, not only did she comport herself with dignity and grace, but the frank manner in which she spoke also made it easy for people to fall for her as well.

If you excluded the reconstruction sect, her approval rating among the paladins was probably through the roof.

And that wasn’t even getting into the other exceptional someone whom she had head over heels for her.

“And I gotta say, there’s something really cool about an attractive woman dressed in a sharp— Ow, ow, ow!”

“How rude. Please revise that.”

Jeanne, the golden Torture Princess and Exhibit A of people who were head over heels for Izabella, reached over and grabbed Kaito by the hair knot. Her expression was downright sullen. Izabella, for her part, was still flustered from the earlier exchange.

Just as Kaito was in the middle of saying, Izabella was dressed to the nines. Instead of her usual armor, she was wearing a slender dress suit. Its white jacket and trousers were designed to be worn by a woman, but they also would have looked just as spiffy on a man as well, a fact that accentuated Izabella’s androgynous appeal. She was a beauty through and through.

However, Kaito didn’t get a chance to finish his compliment. He frantically apologized as Jeanne pulled harder and harder on his hair.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow… J-Jeanne, you gotta tone down the bloodlust back there! It was my bad, okay! I know she’s your first love and all, and I probably said too much… Ow, ow, ow!”

“I’m just glad you understand, mister. That saves us both quite a lot of time. **You know what you gotta say now, *don’cha*?**”

By the time she was done speaking, Jeanne’s tone had grown downright murderous. Cold sweat trickled down Kaito’s back. That said, they were in front of both Izabella and Hina, so there was probably a limit to how bad

things could get. As far as Elisabeth went, though, the only help she offered was warmly noting, “You seem to be in quite a pinch.”

Kaito raised his hands in surrender.

“Uh, I…I’m sorry?”

“No. I’m not looking for an apology. Like always, your head’s as full of mush as a cat in a sunbeam! Just cotton and fuzz from one ear to the next!”

“Wait, then…what?”

“Hmm,” added Elisabeth. “I haven’t the slightest, either.”

“Elisabeth, you know I’m your servant, right? So when I’m in danger, you’re supposed to come help me.”

“Not my problem, best of luck, et cetera, et cetera.”

Elisabeth’s reply was decidedly aloof. Suddenly, Kaito noticed that Hina and Izabella had wandered off to get a vase for the flowers before they could wilt. If he had been in any actual danger, Hina would have intervened long ago.

In other words, he didn’t need to fear for his life at the moment.

Well, probably.

Jeanne curled the corners of her mouth ever so slightly as she spoke.

“Are you listening, mister? I’ll only say this once. **So clean out that shit in your ears and listen up!**”

“I’m listening, I’m listening!”

“My fair lady…”

Jeanne took a deep breath, a rare human mannerism for the golden Torture Princess to display. Kaito, Elisabeth, and even Vlad listened intently.

Then Jeanne spoke with barely concealed fervor.

“…isn’t just cool, but adorable. **Adorable, I tells ya!**”

“Wait, that’s it? *That’s* the bit you wanted me to revise?”

“Also, why repeat it twice?” Elisabeth asked.

“I suppose she thought it was just that important,” Vlad replied.

The three of them were all well and truly bewildered. Jeanne, expressionless as ever, bobbed her head up and down. Apparently, that was enough to satisfy her. At some point, she had also released Kaito’s hair.

Grateful for that stroke of fortune, Kaito beat a hasty retreat.

That was when it happened.

“Huh?”

A black blur—

—shot toward him like a bullet.

*

“Up—and—at ’emmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A shout that sounded like some sort of strange bird echoed through the air.

Then the black blur—that is, the hunk of bone-in meat—smashed directly into Kaito's face.

Fearing an enemy raid, Izabella reached for the rapier hanging from her waist. However, her puzzlement quickly won out over her concern. People didn't normally use bone-in meat for launching surprise attacks, after all. The force of the blow nearly caused Kaito to topple over, but Hina quickly rushed over and caught him from behind.

After gently lowering his head down onto her lap, she spoke indignantly.

"Come on now, Mr. Butcher, you can't attack Master Kaito by surprise like that! I'm very close to being quite cross with you!"

"Wait, why're you giving me a lap pillow?"

"Hello, hello, hello, Ms. Lovely Maid! My deepest apologies! I was just so giddy about being invited to this banquet, I couldn't help myself! Hello, hello, hello, Madam Elisabeth!"

"Quite," Elisabeth replied.

"Oh yes, and congratulations on your third-year anniversary as whatsit of the Something-Something Brigade!"

"Why is it that your attention to detail always fails at the most inopportune times?" Elisabeth grumbled.

Meanwhile, Kaito shook off the shock from being struck by the raw meat and made to sit up. As he did, though, his gaze met Hina's, and he stopped in place.

Then the two of them exchanged a loving embrace. Elisabeth and Vlad offered up some bemused commentary.

"No, but…why?"

"It's nice that they get along so well, I suppose, but it does seem to be getting in the way of the rest of their lives."

Meanwhile, the Butcher spun like a top and made his way into the dining hall proper. Upon reaching the table, though, he came to an abrupt stop.

He looked up at Vlad and went silent for a little bit. After reconsidering the matter, though, he gave him a big thumbs-up.

"And a fine hello to you as well, Sir Vlad!"

"After contemplating as best you could how to act toward me, that's what you ended up with? I think we can dispense with this strained geniality. I'm a more tolerant man than I look, but even I have my limits."

Vlad smiled cheerfully as he rested his chin on his hands and elegantly crossed his legs. In contrast to his demeanor, though, his voice dripped with outright hostility. On hearing their exchange, Elisabeth was reminded of something.

That's right—Vlad and the Butcher share a karmic bond.

The Butcher was the one who'd given Vlad the First Demon's meat. However, that, too, had been part of the Saint's plan, and during Ragnarok, Vlad had made no secret of his fury at having been used as a pawn.

I know not how they met, nor how their relationship developed from there. But Vlad clearly didn't appreciate being used. I've no doubt he harbors harsh feelings toward the Butcher.

On hearing Vlad's comment, the Butcher lowered his hand. However, it would appear that he planned to just pretend like he hadn't heard anything.

Instead, he whistled and meandered away. After making his way over to Hina, he quickly hid behind her back. When he spoke next, it was from the shadow of her maid outfit.

"Ah, that reminds me! On my way here, I spotted a group who looked to be guests as well! I imagine they'll be here any moment!"

"There are guests yet to come? Who?"

Elisabeth furrowed her brow.

However, her answer arrived quicker than she expected.

Down the hall, she could make out a group of boisterous voices.

*

"Vice-Captain Lute…I know it's a bit late to be asking this, but are you really sure it's all right for us to let ourselves in?"

"As far as Sir Kaito told me, it should be fine. Although I must admit, I didn't expect for us to get chased by a walking suit of armor the moment we came inside… Now, I think it was somewhere around…here?"

"Lute!"

"Sir Kaito! Madam Hina! Captain Elisabeth!"

Kaito sat up from his spot on Hina's lap, and Lute let out a cry of delight. He ran over, and the two of them exchanged a light fist bump—a symbol, perhaps, of how beastfolk-human relations had improved over the past years. Kaito thanked him for showing up.

"I'm so glad you could make it! Wasn't it hard on you, having everyone take the day off at once?"

"Ha-ha-ha, not in the least. Our Lady Valisisa Ula Forstlast's magnanimity knows no bounds! And besides, there aren't nearly as many incidents these days as there were three years ago. Taking a day off like this is nothing! And that, too, is thanks to our captain's undying efforts."

The rest of the Peace Brigade members nodded in agreement. Despite their praise, though, Elisabeth frowned.

The image of a regal beastfolk woman flashed through her mind.

"Valisisa Ula Forstlast…"

The name carried a heavy nostalgia with it. It would appear that Valisisa was in good health, and La Christoph was probably carrying out his duties in the Capital like normal as well, praying and believing in God while accepting the love of the people.

Elisabeth closed her mouth without finishing her sentence.

Her Peace Brigade subordinates let out cries of relief at having finally found the dining hall. It was clear that they'd gotten lost in the castle's vast

corridors. After a few of them handed Hina small gifts as thanks for inviting them, they all got to work removing their armor, revealing the layered formal wear beneath. Each of their chests was decorated with colorful tail feathers.

Even in times of peace, it was exceedingly rare for a beastfolk soldier to take off their armor. It was a sign of their utmost trust in the castle's owner.

They lined up in front of Elisabeth and saluted. However, they then paused.

"Um…Captain?"

"I've a fair guess at what you wish to ask, but go on, say it."

"Is there somewhere you'd like us to put these gifts?"

The beastfolk gestured to the packages they were all carrying. Some were wrapped bundles of cloth, and others were covered baskets, but every one of them was impressively large. Still seated, Elisabeth let out a small sigh.

"This isn't a child's birthday party, you know. I appreciate the sentiment, aye, but surely, there was no need to bring that much! 'Tis excessive!"

"We're sorry, Captain… We just got to thinking about how much you always like to eat, and we got a little carried away."

"Wait…you mean to say… That isn't all food, is it?"

Elisabeth reflexively leaned forward in her chair. The Brigade members meekly nodded. "Just what kind of image is it you have of me?!" she cried, turning her gaze up toward the ceiling. Then she felt a tap on her shoulder.

She looked to her side. There, she saw a beastwoman with a goat head.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your lament, but might I have a moment, Madam Elisabeth?"

"Ain? What is it?"

Ain, Lute's talented wife, was wearing a modest gray dress. She gestured with her chin. Elisabeth looked and discovered that Kaito and Lute were surreptitiously peeking their way. Ain lowered her voice.

"Just now, Sir Kaito and my husband came to me with a request. It's a special occasion, so they were really hoping that all the women would dress up. I'm here to help with that. Do you have a wardrobe room somewhere?"

"Hold on. Jeanne is one thing, but they want me to change, too? What a pain."

"Everyone's gotten on board, even me," replied Jeanne. "As the star of the show, what are you waiting for? If you don't get ready, nothing can start, and nothing can end. **The thing is, see, I gotta go get changed so a certain lovely lady'll tell me I look cute! Get a move on!**"

"I see it didn't take much to win *you* over."

Nobody could have possibly imagined that the self-proclaimed "oppressor of slaves, the savior of the world, the saint, and the whore" would ever get so thoroughly domesticated. Elisabeth sighed in exasperation. A thought crossed her mind.

If I don't get ready, nothing can start, and nothing can end, eh?

There was some truth to that.

Elisabeth nodded, and her heels clicked as she set off. Accompanied by Ain and Jeanne, she headed out into the corridor.

The moment she left the dining hall, it went dead silent.

It was as though nobody had even been there in the first place.

However, Elisabeth pretended not to notice that.

*

Tick, tock… Tick-tock… Tick… Tock… Tick… Tock… Ti-ti-ti-ti—

—ti…tick…?

Of the castle's many rooms, one of them was where Elisabeth kept various garments.

Inside, it was a veritable sea of cloth.

There were whites as white as snow, blacks as black as night, reds as red as roses, and blues as blue as the sky.

Processed fabrics of every quality and texture had been haphazardly shoved inside. The room seemed to go on forever, yet at the same time, it felt as cramped as a box of sweets. Either way, though, it was an odd state of affairs.

The thing was, Elisabeth didn't own anywhere near that many dresses. In fact, the wardrobe room had originally held mostly outfits for her servants. At that point, though, an irregularity that minor hardly even warranted notice.

After all, nothing about the situation—

—could be described as anything approaching normal.

Hina hadn't accompanied them to the wardrobe room. Because of how early the guests had arrived, she was still in the middle of setting the table. Lute and the rest of the beastfolk had offered their services and were helping carry various plates to and fro.

As she directed them around, Hina had offered Elisabeth a wave.

Her warm smile was the last thing Elisabeth had seen before departing the area.

Now Elisabeth was facing off against a seemingly endless assortment of dresses. Beside her, Jeanne let out a faint murmur.

"Man, I ain't got a fuckin' clue what to pick."

"Hey now, best not omit the polite bits entirely."

Elisabeth shot Jeanne a warning. If Izabella were there to hear her, she'd probably have gotten upset and scolded Jeanne for her foul language. However, Jeanne proceeded to cock her head to the side. It would appear she actually didn't know what would be best to pick.

Ain took that as her cue to briskly step forward. She spread her arms with the mountain of clothes laid out behind her.

"Now then… It looks like answer is no, but I'll ask anyway—do either of you have anything specific in mind?"

“No. I’m up shit creek here, lady! How the hell does everyone else pick out their own clothes like it’s nothing?!”

“I haven’t anywhere near the patience to look through that mass. I’m more than happy to delegate the selection to you. I’d prefer something extravagant, though, with bold lines and clean cuts.”

“Ah…something to my lady’s preference would be nice, actually.”

“Something flashy and something trim, then. Very well. One moment.”

Ain strode forward, her expression as composed as ever. The other two watched as she descended into the sea of cloth. It was like a fish vanishing into a wave, or perhaps a honeybee slipping into a rose. The soft folds of fabric conformed to her shape, then went still again. Elisabeth and Jeanne waited in solemn silence.

A few minutes later, the two of them shared a quiet exchange.

“…This is taking quite a while.”

“It really is. **Fuckin’ hell.**”

“Sorry about the wait.”

Ain popped her head out of an opening in the mass of dresses. Elisabeth and Jeanne practically leaped out of their skin.

Just as promised, she was holding a pair of dresses. The other two each took their proffered item. Elisabeth turned hers inside out, then nodded.

“Aye, not bad.”

“Yes, mine looks good as well. I’m gonna be the belle of the goddamn ball!”

Jeanne seemed to have taken quite a liking to hers. The main dress was golden, and it was adorned with a number of pieces of faintly gleaming cloth, which were layered atop it. On its back sat a ribbon in the shape of a flower. And as for Elisabeth’s dress, it was black with crimson highlights and had suggestive openings on its sides.

Upon seeing their expressions, Ain nodded.

“Now, finding those took a good deal of time, so let’s be nimble and quick about getting you into them.”

“You know, I can’t help but think…”

“Yes, me too. I’ve got a baaad feelin’ about this.”

Elisabeth and Jeanne were no strangers to corsets and tightened belts. Even so, though, the way the skilled healer in front of them looked to be itching to go was enough to strike fear into both of their hearts.

But it was Ain’s next words, and the unsettlingly cheerful tone she said them in, that truly sealed the deal.

“You’re both in good health, but I can see you’ve let that keep you from learning to take proper care of your bodies. Let’s see if we can’t get those joints moving a little.”

The two of them were both Torture Princesses.

As such, chirotherapy was a sensation yet unknown to them.

Elisabeth and Jeanne tried frantically to flee. Before they could get far, though, Ain snatched Jeanne by the shoulder, and Jeanne replied by quickly grabbing Elisabeth's wrist in kind.

"H-hey, Jeanne! Don't get me wrapped up in this! Unhand me!"

"Never! If I'm goin' down, you're comin' down with me!"

"Making more victims is never the answer!"

"Don't worry," Ain reassured them. "When it starts hurting, just raise your left hand."

"By that phrasing, you make it sound as though pain is a presumption!"

"W-wait, no, I—I said 'wait,' goddammiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"

Jeanne's shrill cry echoed across the sea of cloth.

The two Torture Princesses both let out rare screams, then were quickly silenced.

*

Tick, tock… Tick-tock… Tick… Tock… Tick… Tock… Ti-ti-ti-ti—

…Tick?

T-tick?

"I-I've never been through such a harrowing experience in all my days."

"So much clicking and clacking and snapping and popping… **Who knew bones could even bend like that?**"

"Now, I hope this will serve as a reminder to the both of you to take regular care of your bodies. If I don't see some improvement, next time is going to have to involve a medicinal bath."

"Heavens, woman, what do you intend on doing to us next? What more could you possibly ask of our poor bodies?"

Elisabeth and Jeanne clung to each other and trembled. Ain's nails were sharp, but her fingers were nimble enough to perform all sorts of minute movements. Never before had the two of them cursed the beastfolk's digital evolution so much.

"Welcome back! Oh, Lady Elisabeth, Ms. Jeanne, you look splendid! Those dresses fit you so well! They're splendid! Lady Elisabeth, you're like a gleaming jewel! And, Ms. Jeanne, you're like a lovely little flower! If the world could speak, it would boast of both your beauties to all creation!"

"Mmm, 'tis a most pleasant way to be complimented."

Hina hopped up and down before Elisabeth like an excitable puppy. Elisabeth nodded. That alone made all the strain and suffering she'd endured worth it. Kaito, who was in the middle of carrying a set of wine bottles with Lute and the others, stopped in his tracks.

Then he rushed over to Elisabeth and let out a cry of astonishment.

"Hey, that looks nice on you! See, I told you it'd be good to try wearing a normal dress every now and again."

"Your compliment is perfunctory at best. I give it failing marks."

"Why?! I said you look nice!" he shot back, flustered.

At present, Elisabeth’s slender frame was clad all in black, with her two arms bare at her sides. Her collar was so low that it exposed her collarbone, and she had a crimson shawl draped around her neck.

She looked bewitching, yet at the same time, strangely ephemeral.

“You think a pedestrian word like *nice* is sufficient to capture the entirety of my refined beauty? Why don’t you try that again until you get it right?”

“Hey, having self-confidence is great and all, but you gotta cut me some slack.”

“See, I knew it would look good on you!”

Then Elisabeth and Kaito heard a delighted cry. They looked over at its source.

Izabella was standing in front of Jeanne, who was standing stiff as a board, and nodding repeatedly. Izabella scooped up a tuft of her full, honey-blond hair in her gloved hand.

“It’s just as I thought—a maidenly dress like this truly brings out your beauty. It’s so sweet, so charming. And the color goes perfectly with your hair!”

“……**.....**”

“Oh hey, I guess we finally figured out how to get her to be quiet,” Kaito commented.

“See, what Izabella gave there was a model compliment. Try taking a lesson from her,” Elisabeth replied.

“Wouldn’t that sound kinda creepy coming from me?”

“…Ah, true enough.”

Elisabeth nodded deeply, and Hina hopped up and down in front of her.

“That’s not true at all! The enchanting words that Master Kaito spins with his honeyed voice are always the finest there can be! Lessons are useless for him because he’s been unmatched at compliments since the day he was born! Hmph!”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Hina. You’re the cutest, just like always.”

Kaito wrapped Hina in a tight embrace to calm her down.

Meanwhile, Izabella took Jeanne by the hand and headed for her seat. The beastfolk, now finished with moving the wine, hurried back to the table as well. Lute theatrically pulled Ain’s seat back for her. Vlad hadn’t once budged from his seat, and the Butcher was restlessly scattering flower petals around the room.

Elisabeth assumed the seat of honor and gazed out over the table.

Sitting atop its pearl-gray tablecloth was a fine feast indeed.

There was organ pie, a whole roast hen, potherbs of every sort, vegetables in jellies and potages, seafood, myriad desserts, and countless other labor-intensive dishes all arranged in a beautiful spread.

And as a finishing touch, the silver and white flowers sat decoratively at their center.

Kaito stood by Hina’s side, his arm gently wrapped around his wife’s back.

They leaned toward each other, the very image of bliss, then faced Elisabeth and smiled.

“Congrats, Elisabeth. Good work these last three years.”

“Congratulations on three years well served, Lady Elisabeth.”

“Aye, thank you. And thank you, everyone, for coming.”

Elisabeth looked out over the group. All of them were wearing warm smiles on their faces.

Kaito and Hina. Izabella and Jeanne. Lute and Ain. Her beastfolk subordinates. The Butcher. Vlad.

Everyone was there. How unnaturally convenient.

"…Thank you, truly."

For a brief moment, Elisabeth closed her eyes. She breathed in a deep breath.

Then she clenched her fists and spoke.

"Now then, it seems high time…"

However, she stopped midsentence. She hesitated, unsure if she should continue.

She glanced Kaito's way once more, her gaze strangely reminiscent of a child's.

Is this for the best? she was asking him. I'm not making a mistake?

But Kaito Sena—

—just returned her gaze—

—smiling at her like he had once before.

And so Elisabeth opened her mouth, emptying her lungs of words and breath alike.

To end it all.

"…we put this charade to rest!"

And in that moment, the world was filled—

—with the heavy, heavy ringing of a bell.

*

Creeeeak… Ding-dong… Ding-dong… Ding-dong…

Ding-dong

Ding—

—dong

D i n g D o n g

*

There was nothing there.

And yet at the same time, there was everything.

If one was to describe that place, the most apropos comparison would be to a blank white canvas. Or perhaps a completely black canvas. Nothing meaningful was painted atop it. In other words, one could paint over it to their heart's content.

It was empty, and it was free.

There was nothing there, yet there was everything.

That was where Elisabeth now stood.

At the spot that lay after the end and before the beginning.

By all accounts, nobody should have been there. Mankind had yet to even be born. However, Elisabeth could sense someone behind her. They were still and silent.

Not turning around, Elisabeth spoke in a soft whisper.

“I know nothing of this place. And I suspect it isn’t just me. Nobody does, save for one exception.”

The list of people who’d witnessed the blank world before the reconstruction was short.

In fact, it had but one name on it—the reconstructor, the one who built the world, who wielded the brush all those lifetimes ago. The Saint.

“This scene was formed from your memories, was it not?”

“…When did you notice?”

“Notice what?”

“That the world laid out before you was all just a fabrication.”

Despite the fact that they were asking a question, the other speaker showed no sign of alarm or confusion. This was an outcome they’d seen coming.

Elisabeth looked up at the sky. Everything above her was empty and hollow. There were no clouds, no sun, and no stars. Not even color. It would seem the two of them truly were standing atop the canvas. Below them, it was white, and above them, there was nothing.

It was a lonely place.

There was no death there.

But the world itself had no life.

And a world with nothing born unto it was a lonesome place indeed.

Elisabeth couldn’t help but lower her voice.

“Subconsciously? Since the start, I daresay… But it only truly became clear with the Butcher. That man betrayed us, and he had no regrets. There was no reason for him to ever appear before us again. And that was precisely why I created him—as a method to put my confusion into order.”

In her eyes, that was the role he played.

As a person, the Butcher was someone who constantly spouted nonsense yet always held the answers she was looking for.

The person behind her didn’t reply, leaving Elisabeth’s words to echo across the ivory plane. Suddenly, those words materialized, taking on a form as hard and brittle as glass. Then they shattered and vanished into nothing.

Even words were alien to a place as empty as this. Like ink spilled in water, they refused to conform, instead getting swept away by some invisible hand. Undeterred by their change, Elisabeth went on.

“This place resembles somewhere else—a dream, spun by a demon. Although, granted, that one was a psychological attack, so the nuance differed somewhat. This place uses memories as its base, and each time I grow suspicious of it, it breaks down and builds itself anew. Thus, the world within can remain gentle forevermore. Ha, what an absurdly convenient

dream. Why, if the end of days hadn't come, I'd have been executed. Burned at the stake, as was my destiny."

Elisabeth clenched her fists. Inside the dream, three years after Ragnarok, everything had fallen into place. Nothing had been lacking, and everything in her life had been good. But no matter how fate had turned, such a world could never really have come to be.

"Kaito was there, and Hina. The Butcher was alive. Jeanne, Izabella, my men—they were all there as well, and I worked in the beastfolk lands. How could such a place possibly exist?! 'Tis ridiculous! Utter absurdity! Yet exist it did in there."

Elisabeth bit down on her lip, hard. It had used her memories to temporarily bring about an impossible future.

It was like a fictitious castle built out of sand.

No matter how many times it fell, it would always come back.

But because of that, it was a castle that could never hold a permanent form.

"A sandcastle by the beach. A stage, repeating the same act again and again. A piece of sugar candy, melting away—'tis too pleasant to be called a nightmare, yet too unsettling to be taken as benevolence. So why? Why call me here?"

The figure behind her didn't move. Elisabeth didn't turn.

If they wanted her dead, she would be dead. If she had expressed malice, they would likely have lopped off her limbs. However, they just stood motionless, seemingly bewildered by their own actions.

And so Elisabeth pressed on.

Without so much as looking at *her* face.

"Answer me, Saint."

"The thing about…dreams, you see…"

The Saint began to answer. Elisabeth closed her eyes as she listened to the woman's strangely childish voice.

The Saint went on, as though trying to validate her own intentions.

"I felt that…everyone has the right to dream."

"How do you mean?"

"You bore the burden of the world… Or rather, the people you care about most did. And it fills you with anguish. And so…I, too, would have liked to gaze upon a dream of the time before everything went to ruin."

At the end, Elisabeth heard a small gasp. That was the wish the Saint had sealed away deep within her heart. It was an insipid, fleeting wish, to be sure. Eventually, Elisabeth let out a short sigh.

"I see. So not quite benevolence, then, but pity. However…"

With her eyes still shut, Elisabeth began walking forward into the darkness. After the first step, though, she felt a pair of hands grab her wrist. Those weren't the Saint's fingers. No, it was a sensation so nostalgic, it almost made her tremble—the hands of the two people she loved so much,

she couldn’t stand it. But Elisabeth knew. Those two would never have stopped her there.

They would have wanted her to move forward, even if it meant she had to do so alone.

It was cruel, without a doubt.

Yet even so…

Yet even so.

“…I’ve no need of it. I saw the only dream I need long ago.”

Once, the Torture Princess saw something beautiful.

Two beautiful people.

They were people who made the world worth saving.

“And I was by their side.”

Now they were gone.

Yet even so, there were some things that would never vanish.

And so Elisabeth shook off the shadow of her memories and walked. Just like she had walked in front of Kaito when they were trapped in that nightmare long, long ago.

Even though this time, there was no one by her side.

“That was enough.”

And with that, she quickened her pace, eventually breaking into a run. Without looking back—

—she abandoned the Saint.

*

Ding-dong……ding-dong……ding-dong……ding-dong……ding-dong…… ding-dong

Ding-dong

*

It felt like a bell was ringing somewhere.

A solemn noise, echoing through the air before vanishing.

It was a sound that signaled the end.

However, it was probably just a trick of the wind.

Or perhaps, without a doubt—

—it came from someone’s dream.

*

Elisabeth slowly opened her eyes.

She was sitting in a place with no night or day.

She glanced about. All around her was purity crafted from snow and water, wind and mana. Above her, a rainbow sheen hung in the milky-white sky. The sky had no sun, nor did it have a moon.

It was beautiful, but there was nothing there, making its beauty hollow. Delicate snowflakes fell from the sky and piled upon the ground.

Two toppled pillars of ivy sat atop the snow.

She was at the World's End. The pillars rested in that pure world, corpses of giants lying on top of each other and propping the other up. There was a shrine-like cave where the two pillars met, decorated by the azure and crimson roses that yet dotted the ivy. And that cave was precisely where Elisabeth was sitting.

Upon realizing that she was leaning against the crystal, Elisabeth let out a small breath.

"…Ah, I see."

Even without turning to look, she already knew—there were two people sleeping inside that crystal.

Their faces no doubt bore the same wordless smiles as always.

This was reality.

The crystal was cold and hard.

The distance that its clear walls separated was slim, yet it was farther than the World's End.

Inside, Kaito Sena was slumbering with his bride, bearing the burden of a world that, by all rights, he should have had nothing to do with.

Elisabeth reviewed the situation.

Mankind had committed a grave sin. Countless people had let themselves be bystanders, and now the mixed-race folk were taking their revenge. The imperial princess had died a noble death, the demi-human had betrayed everything for the people he loved, and the saints' representative had died while still believing in everything and in God.

As a result, the living were descending into fear and suspicion, and a new battle was cresting the horizon.

This was where Elisabeth had come before the fighting began in earnest.

As she sat with her back to the crystal, she must have nodded off.

And when she did, she dreamed.

It was a long, long dream.

She thought back on the words she'd said just before falling asleep.

"Would it not be better for a world such as this simply to end?"

"Yet even so…"

The words slipped from her mouth. She wasn't going to turn back.

And so she whispered to those she'd seen in her dream—

—and to the smiles long since lost.

"Yet even so."

She clenched her fists tight.

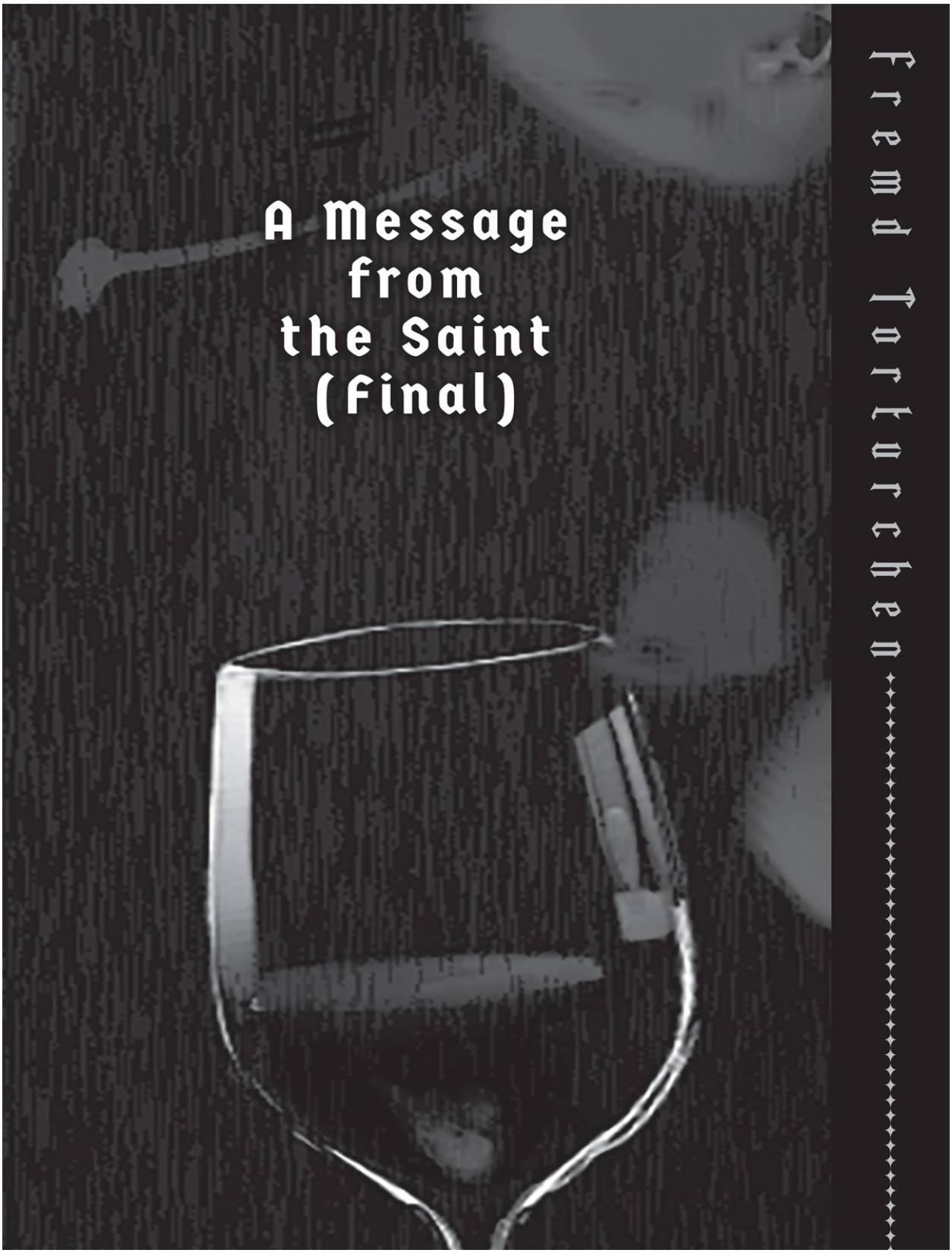
Then she glared forward, her eyes gleaming like rubies.

The battle to determine the world's destiny was beginning.

The one that would determine if everyone deserved to live—

—or if everyone deserved to die.

A short while later, the bell rang, and the curtain rose.


A Message
from
the Saint
(Final)
Fremd Torturchen

A Message from the Saint (Final)

I've been thinking about atonement.

Up until now, it was a topic that never even crossed my mind.

No, it would be more accurate to say I decided to forget about it. You see, long ago, I chose to reconstruct the world in order to make up for my sins. However, I was never able to forgive the innocent masses for theirs.

I wasn't able to bear the weight of having to shoulder everything alone. And so I destroyed everything.

But now, having survived, I realize something.

I was in the wrong. And not only that, but I've also always known I was.

What a terrifying thing that is to realize.

People died. Countless throngs of them, savagely butchered. Corpses piled up thousands high, and in the end, even the world itself broke. Tens of thousands of sobbing voices filled the air. Some died trying to save others. Some died trying to save themselves. But they died all the same.

And it was my fault. Mine, and mine alone.

The Mad King told me something. "Lucky you," he said. "You got everything you ever wished for."

And so I did.

But you see, that wasn't it.

I wanted everything to be destroyed.

But I never wanted this.

I'm well aware how contradictory that is. But no matter how many times I reconsider my answer, it never changes.

You…you, who's been listening to my message all this time. I told you, didn't I?

I never loved you people—

—and certainly not enough to want to leave you with my words.

Those were my true feelings; they really were. That was my wish. I cursed you. A curse on everything, and a curse on you.

But I never wanted to soil my hands. I never wanted to cause you such profound pain. I never wanted to wrench your chests open and gaze upon your still-beating hearts.

And I swear, I never wanted to kill you.

I didn't want to hear your laughter—

—but I didn't want to hear your screams, either.

That was the long and short of it.

That was how I truly felt.

I know it seems late for me to be realizing that now. But that's the way things are.

By the way, the Mad King told me something else, too.

He told me that I *“chose”* to be alone.

I needed to understand what he meant by that. I needed to learn about this person who he said he liked. But in doing so, I came to realize something else.

I was ignorant. I should have known everything, yet I let so many things slip between the cracks.

Will you…hear me out?

O ye who never once replied?

I hated you. I cursed you. I told you to go die.

And yet—

And yet, even so…

Hearing this from me now probably won’t do you any good. But these are my true feelings, so I beg you to lend me your ear.

Please survive.

Please survive as long as you can.

Even once the next ugly war takes this fragile little world in its grasp.

And thank you for listening to my message.

I waited and waited and waited, but no answer ever came.

Yet even so, the fact that I had someone listening to me was what saved me.

This will be my final message.

To you, and to all others who bear life—

—may you suffer my curse—

—and may you find blessings enough that it will not break you.

And thank you—

—for being born unto this world I reconstructed—

—and for fighting back against my hatred.

Good-bye.

✦✦✦✦ The Parent and Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World 10 ✦✦✦✦

That was what I witnessed.

I saw a pair of eyes filled with pure, horrific madness.

I saw a form of salvation that never should have existed.

Nobody else knows about the gentle yet utterly profane way that parent and child live and support each other.

That was why I had to tell someone about them. That's the conviction that now drives me.

That was why I wrote this journal at first. About what I saw. About them.

The whole world will come to hate them, I'm sure.

Alice and Lewis will be denounced as viler than the basest of demons.

But I tell you, I witnessed them sharing a brief time of tranquility.

Those days may have been as fleeting as a mirage, but they were beautiful all the same. And that's why I'm writing these journal entries.

Even though no one may ever read them.

As I look up at the sky in solitude, I'm reminded once more that the choice I made was the right one. There are strange birds flying above me, passing overhead like a dark storm cloud.

I can hear their cries. "Revolution against the three races," they call. "Revenge for the massacre."

I assume everyone will die. They may have spared me once—

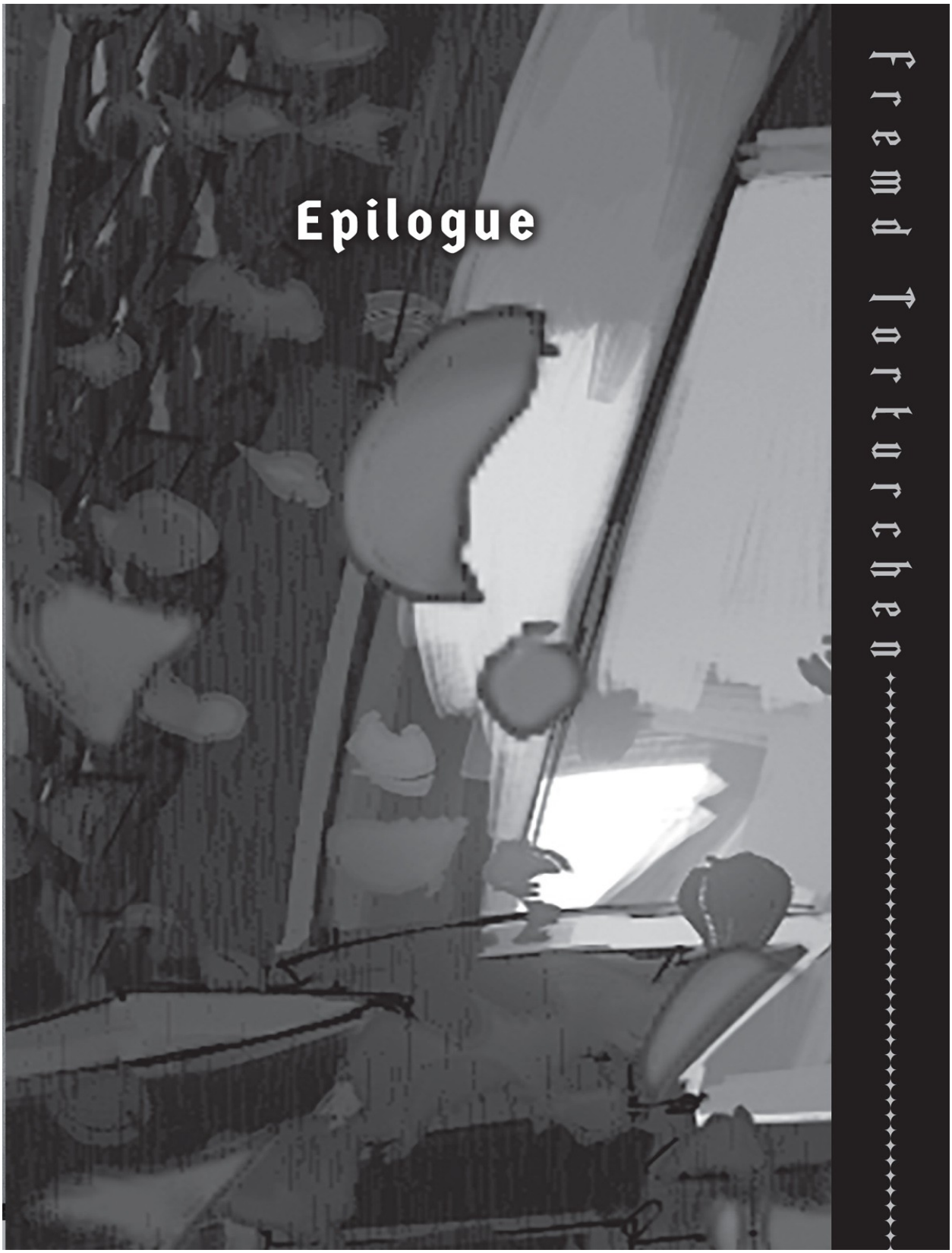
—but even though I am of mixed race, I doubt it will happen again.

Soon, my time will run out as well. But I was able to finish this journal.

And so it's fine. For in this moment, I know.

Writing this—

—is what my entire journey was leading to.



Epilogue

Epilogue

Two people slumbered in a crystal at the World's End.

Before that crystal, the Torture Princess awoke.

She stared up at the sky.

In that moment, the Saint's consciousness rose from the depths of her dream as well. While the Torture Princess slept, the Saint had been in the fabricated world along with her, watching over the events within as the master of the transient castle.

Although the Saint no longer had access to the massive amount of magical power she did when she had contracts with God and Diablo, a certain technique of hers allowed her to tap into bottomless reserves of mana all the same. Furthermore, she had been a peerless mage since before the world's reconstruction, and all her skills were still intact. Imitating the ability of a decomposing demon was child's play for her.

Normally, the world that the Saint wove would have lasted a little longer. However, Elisabeth's malaise had hastened its destruction, forcing it to rebuild itself over and over again until the constant rejection caused it to lose its form for good and shatter completely.

Like a sandcastle, getting struck by progressively larger and larger waves.

And now the child playing in the sand had left the beach entirely.

"The path you've chosen is a harsh, solitary one indeed."

Giving her that dream had been the Saint's expression of pity. For she knew better than anyone the agony of bearing a foolish world on one's shoulders. Fighting in solitude ate away at a person's heart and could even make them forget the things they once thought were beautiful.

Elisabeth Le Fanu had the right to flee before she came to despise everything. Nobody could deny her that.

But the Torture Princess had said, *"Yet even so."*

Yet even so.

And as such, there was nothing more for the Saint to say to her.

As Elisabeth glared off into space, the Saint made her move before Elisabeth could spot her.

Garbed in a completely different outfit than the one she had worn long ago, the Saint pulled her hood down over her eyes, then quickly left the ivy-entwined corpses behind. Snowflakes crunched under her feet, and she gazed up at the sky.

Its rainbow film was the same as ever, but far away, declarations of malice, hatred, and violence echoed through the distant sky.

"Then I, too, will go."

The Torture Princess had chosen to fight, so she, too, had a duty to carry out.

For the people she once cursed—

—and for the things she once discarded—

the Saint herself was going to fight.

And with that, the encounter between the Saint and the Torture Princess —

—came to a quiet end.

It all took place a little while before—

—the final battle of those who loathed the world.

Afterword

Hello, Keishi Ayasato here. As you can tell, Volume 7.5 was a series of short stories. I wanted to make sure everyone got a chance to read these before you all headed into Volume 8, so I'm really glad I was able to get these tales compiled like this.

Now, there's no page count to stop me, so it's time to dive into some backstory on each of the sections!

Kaito Sena's Daily Routine (Front Side/Back Side)

Chronologically, this story takes place right after the battle against the Knight. At this point, Kaito hasn't met Neue yet. Back when these short stories were being released as a web serial, this was the very first one I wrote. It was also where the idea of having a front side and a back side written from different points of view started out. What is a daily routine anyway? Incidentally, this was also the story that I needed to rewrite the most extensively for this compilation. I hope you enjoyed it.

Elisabeth's Daily Routine (Front Side/Back Side)

Chronologically, this story takes place before Volume 2 and after *Animal-Ear Capriccio*, the side story about the Grand Governor's defeat. Out of all the short stories, this one was definitely the most "*Torture Princess*-y" of the bunch. Although *Duke of Exeter's Daughter* doesn't show up in the main story, it's a personal favorite of the torture devices I've written into the story. I've also always wanted to try having Hina and the Butcher team up, so it was a lot of fun writing those bits. When those two get together, no straight man can possibly keep up.

Hina's Daily Routine (Front Side/Back Side)

This one also takes place before Volume 2, but even further after *Animal-Ear Capriccio*—in fact, it takes place after the special edition of *Role-Swap Rondo and a Kiss for Sleeping Beauty*. This story definitely skewed heavier on comedy than the others. When I was writing a story based around Hina, it was nice getting to come up with something that would let her spend the plot happily working away.

The New Content

As you could probably tell from reading this story, it takes place immediately following Volume 7. It was designed as a series of highlights to reminisce on where we've come and how we got here before we get into Volume 8 and the meat of Part 2, so I borrowed a lot of bits and pieces from several different volumes for the various scenes. It might be interesting to go reread it and see what you can find. The setup afforded me a lot of freedom in how I structured and wrote the story, so I had a lot of fun

working with it. With this, we're ready to head into Volume 8. I really hope you enjoyed everyone's final party.

A Message from the Saint

When this was part of the web serial, it only went as far as *A Message from Someone*. Back then, I already had the outline of the Saint's story laid out, so I wanted to make sure these sections were set up such that it would all make sense later down the line. Finally getting to finish her Message came as a big relief. Now you have the full picture on what she thought and felt.

I hope that someday, we'll get a chance to see her again.

The Parent and the Child, or Perhaps the Enemies of the World

Originally, this story wasn't part of the manuscript at all. Because of how the page count on the compiled short stories worked out, though, the book ended up having a lot of blank pages. That was when my editor O suggested that I write a story about Alice and Lewis, and the rest is history. I was really happy to have the chance to touch on their lives in this compilation, and I hope you all get a chance to read through it before you move onto Volume 8.

In the end, it made me really happy to get to show off so many different aspects of *Torture Princess* here.

I will note that the beastfolk didn't get much of a chance to appear this time, nor did the saints, so ideally, there'll be an opportunity to tell more of their stories in the future. For now, though, this intermission has reached its end, so I hope you all look forward to the main story continuing in the next volume.

Finally, as usual, we move on to the acknowledgments section.

I'd like to thank Saki Ukai, for the gorgeous cover and in particular for being able to fit so many characters on it; my editor O, for everything as always; Hina Yamato, for delivering a manga adaptation packed so full of love; everyone else involved in the series; and my beloved family, in particular my older sister. Thank you all so very much.

And above all else, I'd like to give a heartfelt thank-you to every reader who picked up Volume 7.5.

Next up is Volume 8. After I finished Volume 7, I could tell that the rest of the plot was going to be even more dense and detailed. Putting everything down on paper is going to be a challenge, but I'll do my best to get it right. If you don't mind, it would mean the world to me if you continue following along and watch the characters confront their destinies.

"And yet even so," she said.

And now it all begins.

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